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Urban nostalgia

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# EDITORIAL

Nostalgia – typically understood as the longing for the past and the feeling of loss in the face of change – tends to be dismissed as a reactionary sentiment; one that repudiates modernity and progress, is steeped in myth-making, exclusivity and sentimentality, and, as such, is invariably deemed to be fraudulent and politically objectionable.

In the city, one could point to those trite instances where self-proclaimed 'indigenous' residents lament the disappearance of an imagined close-knit and homogenous community, as the thinly veiled premise for rejecting the social and cultural diversity of the present. Nostalgia is also often spun into the visions of urban planners, who are deft at legitimating structural changes to the built environment through pledges to recovering the cleanliness, safety, order, greenness or conviviality of a bygone era.

However, nostalgia is not just politically conservative. As the geographer Alastair Bonnett insists in his 2010 book *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*, nostalgia has also been an important but rarely acknowledged aspect of the radical imagination. 'The idea,' argues Bonnett, 'that society can be divided between tear-streaked reactionaries besotted with the past and flint-eyes radicals staring into the future, has run its time' (2010, p.170).

The rhetoric of loss is, in fact, frequently implicated in the everyday strategies for the 'right to the city', such as the acts of resistance against gentrification and displacement that are mobilized in defence of working-class and popular histories. Meanwhile, critiques of, and responses to the deleterious impact of, say, neoliberalism, crisis or labour precarization upon urban life are often underpinned by a pining for a (slightly) better past. This gives rise to broader questions about the possible roles that nostalgia might play in a radical, future-oriented, urban politics and the ways in which this is articulated and inscribed in the fabric of the city.

This issue of *Lo Squaderno* sets out to explore how nostalgia shapes, distorts and reconstitutes the ways in which people perceive, experience and/or struggle in the contemporary city, be this for emancipatory or regressive ends. The collected papers seek to interrogate the underlying ambivalence of nostalgia in relation to contemporary urbanism across different social, political and geographical contexts and, in doing so, they diversely address ways in which forms of belonging and attachment are harnessed and contested.

Jan De Haes and Matthew Archer consider the paradoxical role of blues tourism in urban development strategies in Clarksdale in the Mississippi Delta. The authors vividly describe how the pursuit of an authentic blues experience on the part a largely white, high-income constituency is implicated in the reproduction of inequitable power relations and the depoliticization of memories of poverty and oppression among the town's predominantly black population. Hence, while the marketing of blues nostalgia has led to the proliferation of spuriously ramshackle juke joints and eateries, this has been offset by the allure of non-descript venues that exist 'irrespective of tourist demand, entrepreneurs or policy makers', where more intrepid visitors can experience 'real' blues, on condition that they take heed of the potentially 'rough crowd'.

Tone Huse takes us for an evocative walk around the vast housing complex Blok P in Nuuk, the capital city of Greenland, before and after its demolition in 2012. Once reputed to have housed 1% of the nation's population, this modernist behemoth became associated with social blight, suicide and substance abuse, and yet it was also the site of intimate attachments to place. Nostalgia becomes 'the organizing narrative of our shared journey', that allows us to take in memories of the coagulated seal and fish blood blocking the drainpipes, the farcical inappropriateness of the standardized apartments, but also recollections of unprecedented luxury and turf loyalties.

Marta Pappalardo scrutinizes the nostalgic imaginary that has framed the regeneration of the once wealthy central residential district of Wust-al-Balad in Cairo. The selective deployment of the past in order to transform

and promote this neighbourhood has recently been challenged during the post-revolutionary era by activists who have laid claim to the collective memories of the occupation of urban spaces such as Tahrir Square. Papalardo's paper explicitly underlines the contested nature of nostalgia and how this is embedded in struggles to reconfigure the city.

Juan Rivero discusses divergent forms of nostalgia that have been mobilized with respect to the disputed redevelopment of Coney Island, New York City's pioneering amusement district. He warns against reading the opposing political orientations of the redevelopers and campaigners through restorative/reflexive and reactionary/progressive binaries. Rather, the conflict is seen to stem from epistemological differences in the two groups' engagement with local history and their strategies for building on the neighbourhood's legacy. In doing so, Rivero calls for a more nuanced and grounded understanding of nostalgia in urban politics.

Drawing on political ecology and ethnographic fieldwork, Jeff Rose contemplates the reasons that led a group of homeless men to camp in unbuilt nature on the edge of a US city. While stressing the positive benefits of 'living in nature', these men simultaneously articulated their disdain for the urban environment in terms of lawlessness, impurity, and despoliation. Rose persuasively argues that, irrespective of their precarious situation, the men's anti-urban sentiments were in keeping with the myth of the US frontier and the nostalgic narrative of taming nature so as to make it closer to the more comfortable urban settings.

Finally, Andrew Wallace and Katy Wright reflect on the interconnections between the politics of nostalgia and deindustrialization in northern England. The authors contend that nostalgic renderings of industrial pasts invariably operate to erase memories of exploitation, environmental contamination and work-related pathologies. While this is underpinned by an uneven geography — whereby leading regional cities such as Leeds and Manchester are in a better position to indulge in nostalgia than others — Wallace and Wright suggest that as secure work and welfare disappear, the struggle to make sense of the histories and relations that constitute urban experience is set to become all the more intense.

Accompanying the issue are photographs and video stills from the project "Stratifications" (Naples 2011-2014) by the artist Carolina Ciuccio. Ciuccio's work tackles the issue of nostalgia in relation to the restoration of a domestic interior and, as such, provides a sort of rescaling of some of the processes that have been addressed in the contributions. In fact, while some of the authors consider the ways in which nostalgia fuels large-scale urban redevelopment projects, here references are made to the accumulation of meanings through the everyday, minor and often unplanned practices and events that inscribe themselves upon the built environment and that are sometimes nurtured by yearnings for the past.





# Nostalgia for the Way Things Never Were

## Authenticity and Ambivalence in the Mississippi Delta

**Jan De Haes**

**Matthew Archer**

Home to the 'Devil's Crossroads' where U.S. Routes 61 and 49 used to meet, Clarksdale, Mississippi, has become a site of nostalgic pilgrimage for fans of blues music the world over. It is at this mythical intersection where Robert Johnson is famously said to have exchanged his soul in return for a supernatural ability to play guitar, which is why this part of the 'Highway 61' connecting Memphis to New Orleans resonates so deeply in American roots music folklore. Today, a sign indicating 'the Crossroads' juts up from a few decorative bushes at the dusty junction. Adorned with ersatz, sun-bleached blue guitars and highway shields, it is a photogenic piece of American history. Across the road is Abe's BBQ which has profited from its proximity to the intersection. It is the sort of old-fashioned place with wood paneling and laminated plastic booths, where barbecue pork sandwiches and tamales come on paper plates, and sweet tea is served in Styrofoam cups. Voluble tourists come to Abe's seeking authentic atmosphere and culinary experiences, while regulars stand patiently by the counter waiting to pick up their lunch orders. Except for the Church's Chicken opposite Abe's, the junction is noticeably devoid of the usual corporate signage that tends to clutter the American roadside. Instead, there is a secondhand furniture shop, two donut shops, an auto repair shop, and a gas station with a mini-mart. With their worse-for-wear facades and unintended retro lettering on faded signs, these local businesses make for the perfect backdrop of obsolescence that geographical imaginations about the Mississippi Delta region demand.

Paradoxically, it is these mundane features of Clarksdale's urban landscape, which distinguish it from the chain stores and car dealerships of countless non-places across the United States. Yet, as local boosters aim to develop the regional economy based on blues tourism<sup>1</sup>, preserving (or rather reproducing) a certain down-at-heel aesthetic also remains central to evoking an "authentic feel" of the blues in its urban and rural spaces. Despite the best intentions of some politicians, the quest to synthetically produce authenticity through depoliticizing and commoditizing certain symbols which refer to collective memories risks both reproducing outsider representations and reinforcing existing power relations. Even as juke joints, heritage sites and blues festivals are actively promoted to keep local heritage alive, this white-washed nostalgia obscures and to an extent romanticizes the historically entrenched inequality and poverty that characterizes the Delta. It is remarkable that although blues mu-

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<sup>1</sup> In the context of devolutionary pressures across the United States, local governments have been compelled to depend less on the federal financial assistance and seek endogenous sources of creating revenue (Donahue, 1997). Woods (1998) nuances the extent to which federal programs have ever provided poverty relief in the Delta due to the manipulation of these programs by landowning vested interests.

sic originated in the black sharecropping culture of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, contemporary boosters (and fans for that matter) tend to be overwhelmingly white (King 2011). The promotion of blues tourism as a regional development strategy is thus rife with an ambivalence that is reflected not only in the spatial and temporal dimensions of how blues music is performed and consumed in Clarksdale, but also at multiple levels of policy-making and implementation.

In the middle of summer, the baking hot streets of Clarksdale's compact downtown seem eerily quiet and ramshackle, with many shuttered businesses and ghost signs on the brickwork. A closer look however reveals that scattered among the exterior signs of urban dereliction, there are a few shiny (and heavily air-conditioned) restaurants, cafés and boutiques where out-of-town visitors and wealthy locals—overwhelmingly white—pay four dollars for a latte and \$200 for a hand-cut shawl. The juxtaposition between these interior and exterior spaces is rather surprising at first, but the two stately white stone (former) bank buildings and the impeccably restored grand homes on Clark Street just north of downtown attest to the incredible wealth that accumulated here over the last two centuries (Cobb 1992).

Large private corporations now operate the former plantations, and mechanized farming has rendered farm labor almost completely obsolete in the region. There has been little to no investment in alternative economic activities for decades (cf. Woods 1998), and so while

*At multiple levels, from the political to the personal, from the economic to the affective, there is a deep ambivalence about relying on blues music to promote economic development through heritage tourism.*

there are still many rich white landowning families living in the Delta, the region's predominately black population constitutes one of the most financially impoverished communities in the United

States, with an annual per capita income close to \$10,000, a lack of reliable access to clean water, electricity, education or healthcare, and high levels of outmigration and unemployment. This underdevelopment trap or negative 'lock-in' (Martin and Sunley 2006) is produced and reinforced by formal and informal plantation-era institutional factors, and so seemingly mundane practices and spatial arrangements have symbolic values that actively preserve features of a troubled past. Thus, the elite nostalgia and use of blues culture as an organizing principle for economic revitalization is problematic in that it risks crowding out real political dialogue about the sources of concentrated poverty.

A closer analysis of the spatial and semiotic features of Clarksdale's juke joints provides an interesting lens on the production of nostalgia and questions of authenticity. In the downtown core (or rather the "White Business Section"<sup>2</sup>) is Ground Zero, the well-known club co-owned by the American actor Morgan Freeman and Clarksdale mayor Bill Luckett. Located a few blocks away from City Hall, it is just across the street (branded as 'Blues Alley') from the former train station, which has been converted into the Delta Blues Museum. Here displays include instruments and outfits worn by famous local blues musicians, as well as photographs, documents, and the sharecropper shack where Muddy Waters was born. Ground Zero is within short walking distance of the old WROX radio station, a craft art store, a music shop, a bohemian boutique and expensive cafés<sup>3</sup>, all of which advertise each other romantically as 'authentic Delta experiences'. This situates the blues club firmly within the capitalist logic of

2 Cf. King (2011, p.16) for a more detailed description of the historical spatial segregation of Clarksdale, and its influence on blues music itself.

3 The majority of these downtown establishments are owned by whites, some by locals, but many by enthusiastic transplants from elsewhere.

consumerism, advertising, and spectacle. The menu features a number of kitschy items—an assortment of ‘sammiches’ like the ‘nekkid BLT’ (bacon, lettuce, and tomato) alongside mixed drinks, local and foreign beers, and top-shelf liquors at heavily inflated prices. Old music posters and local art adorn the peeling walls, and the space is dimly lit by fairy lights and neon signs. Tourists flock from around the world to visit Morgan Freeman’s blues café, and the décor is evocative of old juke joints, although recent renovations and the advice of a professional interior designer render this evocative milieu fairly synthetic.

A useful distinction in considering questions of authenticity is the notion of ‘invited spaces’ versus ‘claimed’ or ‘popular’ spaces from the development geography literature (cf. Cornwall 2002). In the downtown, spaces where blues are consumed tend to be directed at external consumption. Another example is the Bluesberry Café, a shabby downtown diner with slapdash decorations of beer advertisements, flags and newspaper clippings. Its Italian-American owners serve spaghetti, two plates of which, together with four bottles of Bud Light, come to \$30 — an out-of-reach luxury for the large majority of local residents. Most nights, blues artists play to the delight of a dozen or so spectators, most of whom are from out of town and many are European tourists. All the while, the owner bounces from table to table, jovially describing the history of his little café and listing off the famous musicians who have passed across its stage, telling us, in a whisper, that the current performer was battling a devastating drug addiction. Although seemingly more authentic and intimate than Ground Zero, the Bluesberry Café also remains in a sense an invited space, ambivalently bound up in exploiting memories of historical black oppression. On the other side of the train tracks (a recurrent theme in many blues songs) in the black side of town, Red’s Lounge inhabits a crumbling concrete block building behind an old bathtub full of canned beers and quickly melting ice, which are sold for a dollar, cash only. A wealthy British tourist had given us the tip a few days before: “Go to Red’s for real blues, but be careful. It can be a rough crowd.” Its lack of any coherent aesthetic (other than the red lights that illuminate the stage and evoke a brothel or some other seedy establishment) and seemingly accidental juke joint-ness fits neatly with established typologies of what makes an ‘authentic’ juke joint (Nardone 2003). Tourists who like to go ‘off the beaten track’ and are ‘in the know’ have found their way to Red’s, of course. There is no blue marker out front from the Mississippi Blues Commission and it is not on the Mississippi Blues Trail — it is a juke joint that just exists irrespective of tourist demand, entrepreneurs or policymakers<sup>4</sup>.

A sense of ambivalence also pervades policymaking when it comes to the deployment of collective memories of exploitation. Just outside the city limits, the Hopson Commissary “stands today in much the same condition as its glory days over fifty years ago,” and guests can reminisce in a “nostalgic atmosphere” while eating local foods like tamales, barbeque and fried catfish, all while listening to various renditions of local music (Hopson Plantation 2011). Once there, you can stay at the Shack-Up Inn, a set of six refurbished sharecropper houses that even the New York Times recognizes as presumptuous and exploitative. According to the newspaper’s guide to Clarksdale (Gordon 2008), one comment in the Commissary’s guestbook reads “Negrophilia: Commodification: Everything but the burden. Thanks!” The historical grievances to which the Hopson Commissary and Shack-Up Inn’s regime of signs concomitantly refer is readily apparent, yet development practitioners nevertheless promote the Hopson Commissary as a tourist attraction in development plans. King (2011, 163) sees the Shack-Up Inn’s willful ignorance of historical oppression and commodifica-

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<sup>4</sup> This also goes for the illustrious Riverside Hotel down the street from Red’s on Sunflower Avenue, which is still owned and managed by the same black family.

tion of a romanticized past as a missed opportunity “to engender in their visitors a healthy critique of the whole exploitative enterprise” of blues tourism and cultural consumption. The past is intentionally hidden in a “rhetorical strategy” to attract tourists.

At multiple levels, from the political to the personal, from the economic to the affective, there is a deep ambivalence about relying on blues music to promote economic development through heritage tourism. This strategy reflects an elite nostalgia for the way things were, a nostalgia for a future at once both firmly in the past and yet impossible to fully realize. It dangerously demands an authenticity that is at the same time both artificial and natural, constructed and organic, enforced and inherent. The ubiquitous poverty that overwhelmingly and disproportionately affects blacks is, paradoxically, fundamental to blues music, which emerged as a socio-aesthetic response to the horrendous living and working conditions, first, of enslaved blacks and, later, of sharecroppers. Politicians who exhibit a genuine concern for disenfranchised constituents nevertheless feel compelled to maintain plantation-era power relations that would be threatened by an expanding black middle class, while activists and development practitioners worry about the performative aspects of a synthetically reproduced blues culture whose sense of authenticity depends in large part on the social stasis and culturally embedded sadness of local black performers.

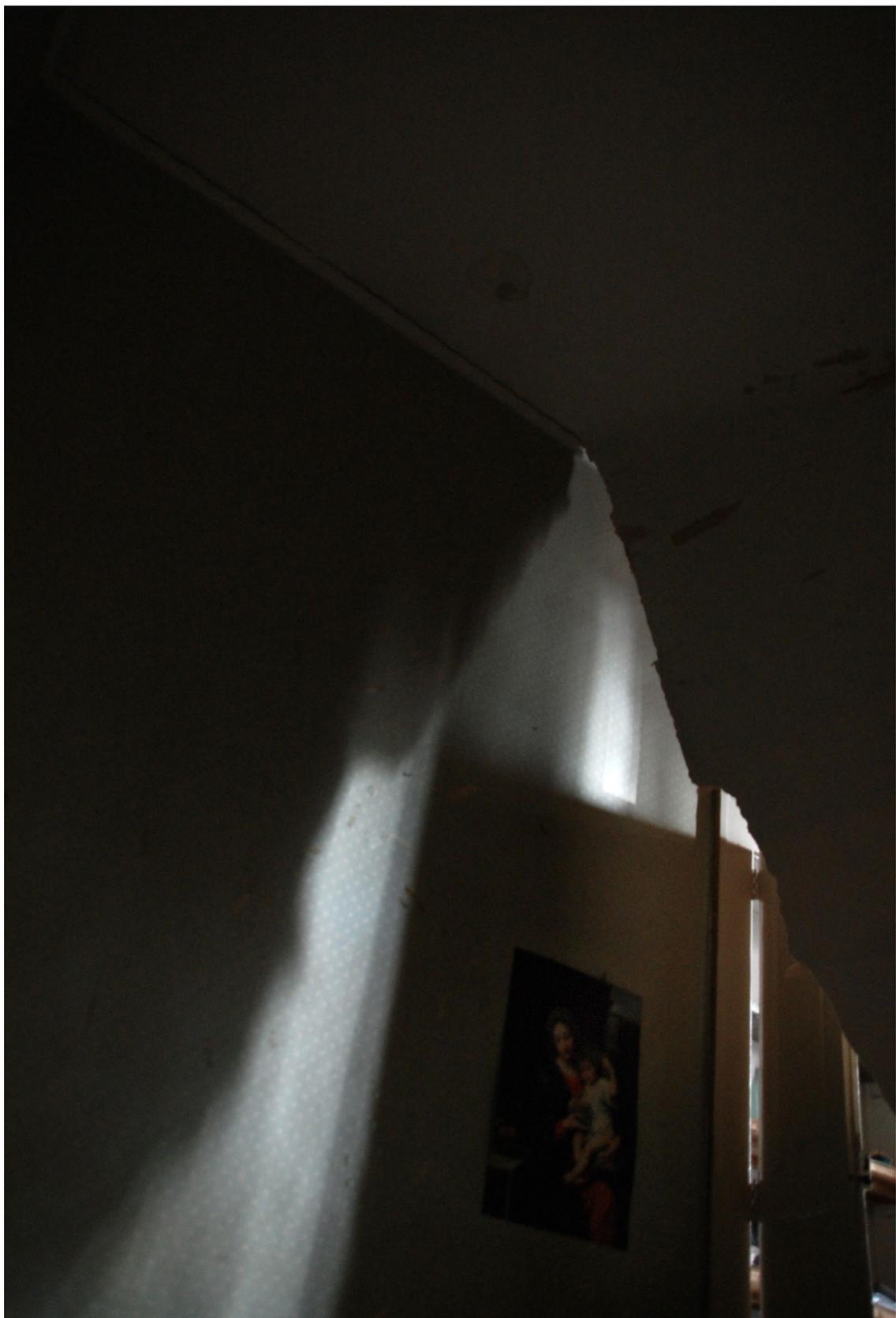
Blues connoisseurs (perhaps a contradiction in terms) recognize the crucial role of real pain and real hardship in the creation and especially the performance of blues music, and they expect those affective resonances to be perceptibly present. Without them, blues music is dismissed as inauthentic. Beyond that, the physical setting of the blues, with its focus on degradation, dirtiness, and danger summons a reality that’s as much a part of the past as it is the present. Places like the Hopson Commissary and Ground Zero degrade the surfaces of their buildings, but offer graceful amenities; to the careful observer and the knowing connoisseur, however, on some scale or gradient of authenticity, they rank lower than other, more genuine establishments like Red’s Lounge (cf. Kockelman 2016 on semiotic gradients). While it is an open question as to what acts as the causal grounds on which these gradients manifest, one obvious factor is the extent to which the pain and hardship associated with Delta poverty are convincing or believable; to put it differently, the question is the extent to which the pain and hardship that the signs of poverty point to are real or performed. Ultimately, blues tourism as a development strategy reflects elite prerogatives that privilege the tourist gaze and maintenance of traditional power relations over the lived experience of local populations. Examining narratives of authenticity and practices of consumption helps reveal the intractable ambivalences of socio-economic development under a regime of durable inequality, and opens the possibility for a more equitable future in Clarksdale.

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# Object Study Walk

## BLOK P

**Tone Huse**

I would like to take you for a walk, around the housing complex Blok P in the centre of Nuuk, Greenland. I encourage you to move and listen, to smell and touch. In the presence of your evoked senses, linger for a moment; turn your face towards the past. Let us explore urban nostalgia, not as an either/or – reactionary, speculative, radical, or future-oriented – but as the organizing narrative of our shared journey.

Before we get going, you need to know this: in 1953 Greenland's status as a colony was lifted and the country became part of Denmark<sup>1</sup>. After 232 years of colonial rule, first under Denmark-Norway, then under Denmark alone, Greenlanders could now elect two representatives to the Danish parliament. Another great event of the 1950s was G-50, a ten-year plan that introduced a number of reforms that envisioned an economically independent Greenland. The plan identified fishing and fish processing as the most promising areas to develop, and decided that the population would have to be centralized: if Greenlanders were to become factory workers, they would have to live close to the factories. A number of cities and settlements were therefore identified as growth areas, while several of the smaller settlements were targeted for depopulation and eventual abandonment. Towards the end of the 1950s, work started on another ten-year plan, the G-60 plan. The centralization strategy remained unchanged, but was now executed with greater force. The fisheries were failing, and the pressure for rationalization therefore increased. Settlements that had been deemed unprofitable were now cut off from state subsidies, which in practical terms meant that their school and health centre were closed down, and their shops would no longer receive goods that local inhabitants depended upon. The inhabitants of the "closed" settlements were moved to the growth areas, among them Nuuk, where new and modern housing complexes were being built. The largest of these complexes was Blok P, which was built in the years between 1965 and 1968. At a certain point, it is said to have housed as much as 1 per cent of Greenland's population.

Many of the city's new inhabitants experienced a great improvement to living standards. Some also entered higher education and assumed leading positions within the Greenlandic community. But in these years of rapid transition and modernization there was also a marked growth in new social problems. Alcoholism became widespread, and with it came violence, abuse and suicide.

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<sup>1</sup> Olsen, Rosing Tupaarnaq. 2005. *I skyggen af kajakkerne: Grønlands politiske historie 1939–79*. Nuuk: Forlaget Atuagkat.

When I first became acquainted with Blok P, in 2010, the building had become a symbol of such grievances. It was in a state of disrepair, and the newly appointed self-rule government had decided to demolish it. In May 2011 I visited Nuuk, intent on studying the relationship between this built form and the social ills it was said to have caused and contained.

Before it is gone, come along and walk with me.

Walk around Blok P: it is 200 metres long, five stories tall.

The boots on your feet will make marks in the snow that has just fallen. As you lift your gaze from these fleeting imprints of your presence, allow yourself to be drawn in by the long, straight lines of Blok P. It looks like it is thrusting itself into the landscape. The paint is peeling, the colours are fading, windows are broken, the woodwork is cracked. Lean your body towards the wall, rest against a door, draw your breath. Do you notice the smell of the mould fungus that breeds on the inside? Blok P stands here making unclean air, air that fills its interiors and makes its inhabitants sick. It is sinking, there are flaws in its foundation.

When I ask if there is any other alternative to demolition, I am told that the deterioration has gone too far. There is no economy in rehabilitation and its current state is not fit for human habitat.

'It is a festering wound', says one. 'A breeding ground for social problems', adds another. 'To demolish it is an opportunity for cleansing'.

Cleanse away the substance abuse. Cleanse away the domestic violence. Cleanse the living conditions of tight quarters and dissolving homes. Cleanse away violence, abuse and suicide. Cleanse away the dismal Greenland Statistics.

'Is the demolition an attempt to evict social problems from the city centre?', ask some. 'The living conditions of Blok P are not fit for human habitat', comes the reply once more.

One of the many Danish settlers who still lives and works in Nuuk tells a story: once upon a time, the pipes in Blok P were blocked. Hunters and fishers from the villages, traditional people, had moved in, but the building was not set up for hunting needs. So, they used the bathtubs to slaughter seal and to gut fish. The blood that drained from the animals went down into the drains of Blok P. In the bowels of the building it hardened, coagulated, and in the end the pipes became blocked.

Blok P: modern and full of blood. Thick, dark, hardened blood. Blood from fish, blood from seals.

As we walk, allow me to read you an excerpt from the Greenlandic Women's Association's Housing Seminar II Report, page 19, dated 1967. Regarding the new housing blocks they write the following:

We lack room for the storage of Greenlandic food. The men go hunting and fishing, and come home very dirty and smelly. Where can they leave their hunting gear, sledges, skis and other things? One of our members previously presented our thoughts about Greenlandic provisions in Copenhagen, but was told that this food will soon be extinct. In our group it is agreed that it will persevere for at least another 50 years.

It is time to go inside Blok P. Climb the stairways and walk along the open-air corridors, in through the doors of apartments whose construction was completed in a world undergoing great change. Student revolt, the civil rights movement, cultural revolution and the fight for freedom. Brand new homes with running water and electricity, central heating, modern kitchens and bathrooms. But no room for self-sufficiency, no room for dirty, smelly men, or

for the things needed to hunt and move in the vast landscapes that surround you.

'It was luxurious!', says one.

'The transition was too swift', thinks another.

The apartments are of different sizes, but all the kitchens are fitted with the same cabinets and equipment. All the floors have the same curly birch parquet. In front of every living room window there is a radiator, in the tiny bathroom there is a sink, a toilet and a shower cabinet.

Walk up stairways and along open-air corridors, into apartment after apartment. There are no bathtubs in Blok P. Is it possible to fit a seal into a shower cabinet?

What we know is that Blok P is the product of settlement politics. Relocation politics. Centralization politics. The closure of villages. Its construction was conditioned upon the reduction of local communities to economic entities: abandon the mountains you know, the ocean that you master. Abandon the house you have built, the tracks you have trodden. Abandon the

*Urban nostalgia claims for us the right  
to grieve that which we have lost.  
It allows us to be suspended, to linger, to dwell as we look*

dead you have buried and take with you those that you have yet to give birth to. Welcome to Blok P. Welcome to the city, to the monetary economy, modernity and all its facilities.

Then, many years later, a settler spins an urban myth: the thread of her story is the naivety of both its subject and its listener. Have you ever seen or touched seal blood? It is so dark it is almost black. The meat is tender and tasty.

A woman who grew up in Blok P tells her story. For many years she kept quiet.

'Let them speak'.

The woman has nothing but good memories, and she wishes to protect them. Conversations about the 'ugly' Blok P tend to distort things.

So, she said nothing, and now it is being demolished.

'Oh!', she says. 'Something in my heart, something deep down, will be gone. When Blok P is gone, how shall I move on? I have a good life, when a part of me is removed, how do I move on from that? It makes me so anxious.'

Let us not forget Blok P, then. In order to remember it we will climb over the fences that have been set up around the demolition site. We will touch the machine that will demolish it. It has been designed to hack the remains of the building into pieces. The outer walls have been peeled off and the interiors are plucked out. Only the concrete skeleton is left standing. Workers have patiently taken it apart. Piece by piece. PCB and asbestos, the wood gathered in one pile, the copper in another. Container after container is filled, driven to the harbour, loaded onto ships for Denmark. Once on Danish soil, Blok P will be taken to incineration plants.

We walk around the concrete skeleton of Blok P, in the company of two people who grew up here. We stare up as one of them points out his old home. With the outer wall removed, one can see straight into what used to be a little boy's bedroom, a family's kitchen, a hallway entrance. Come along as they demonstrate how they got up on the roof. Listen as they tell stories about how they climbed around the balcony railings, how they jumped between floors, about how they had a club in the basement, a rock band. They were the Blok P gang and this was their turf. Down in the basement they find their own names carved into a plas-

tered brick wall: the names of friends, the name of their crew. Snowflakes. On the wall, there they all are. But many are dead now. This one killed himself, hanged himself, shot himself. Soon the concrete will be demolished, crushed to dust and used anew. In the dust are names carved, names drawn, names sprayed onto a wall.

Urban nostalgia claims for us the right to grieve that which we have lost. It allows us to be suspended, to linger, to dwell as we look towards the past. As a companion for our walk, I choose the Angel of History imagined by Walter Benjamin: "His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair, to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm<sup>2</sup>.

Dwell, then, in the traces of Blok P. It is all gone now, but if you listen you can hear the stories being told. Stories about a happy childhood, warm days on the balcony. The archives tell their own particular type of story, in the form of architect drawings, official forms, lists and budgets. There are weekly reports from the building site, written in Nuuk and sent to Copenhagen. Their geography is a story in itself. Come along when a woman takes your hand, with desperate eyes, and says that she will tell you the real story about Greenland.

*Nuuk. Tuujuk, Nuussuaq, Qinngorput – Siorarsiorfik.*

In the void of Blok P Nuuk grows, takes on new callings, makes new plans, adopts a strategy for the solidification of a capital city. The traces of Blok P consists of frames in concrete, a grid that sits deep into the earth, hacked down until the dirt covers it. Here, Nuuk draws its breath. A void in the centre of the city, a space of opportunity, time that slides, time that flies and flows, time that came and time that went.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/benjamin/1940/history.html>





# Patrimonialisation et aménagement urbain au centre-ville du Caire, entre nostalgie du passé et construction de l'avenir

Marta Pappalardo

L'aménagement des centres est un enjeu majeur dans la compétition internationale entre les villes. D'importants chantiers de réaménagement façonnent les espaces urbains, mais plus encore contribuent à la construction d'un imaginaire gagnant. Le patrimoine revêt un rôle fondamental dans ce processus, car il légitime, par sa présence et la nécessité de le protéger, certaines caractéristiques du centre-ville que l'on souhaite transmettre à la postérité. La thématique de la « renaissance » fait partie des arguments utilisés dans la construction de ces visions valorisantes. Selon cette idée, l'aménagement ne crée pas simplement un cadre urbain *ex-novo*, mais ramène à la vie une grandeur ayant déjà existé.

Pour attirer les investisseurs, les villes entrent en compétition entre elles, à travers la production urbaine. Cette stratégie, que Harvey (2008) qualifie de « captation de rentes de monopole », passe par l'exploitation de l'unicité, autrement dit des caractéristiques singulières qui confèrent à la ville une attractivité particulière. Afin d'obtenir une image gagnante et exploitable, la métropole est imaginée et présentée comme un objet unique, en faisant fi de la complexité interne aux sociétés urbaines (Memoli 2005). Ainsi, la valorisation des traits culturels devient l'un des piliers de la stratégie de communication des villes, notamment à travers la tradition et le patrimoine. L'objectif, précise Harvey, n'est pas réductible au tourisme et à ses avantages économiques : le vrai enjeu se situe dans l'accroissement du capital symbolique collectif de la ville, autrement dit ses marques de distinction qui peuvent être de puissants attracteurs de capitaux.

Le Caire, capitale de l'Égypte, paraît un exemple intéressant de cette démarche d'imposition d'un passé, sélectionné à travers la manipulation de sentiments nostalgiques d'une partie de la population, à valoriser dans l'aménagement urbain et, encore plus, dans la construction d'un imaginaire gagnant. Cet article, issu de mes recherches de terrain de thèse, analyse l'utilisation, par les aménageurs caiotes, de la mémoire sélective en tant qu'instrument d'un urbanisme dominant, ainsi que les tensions qui se dessinent, depuis Janvier 2011, entre cette narration imposée et les pratiques renouvelées des habitants du centre.

La sélection de la mémoire transforme et réinterprète le sentiment nostalgique de certaines catégories sociales pour légitimer des opérations urbaines porteuses d'exclusion. Cependant, cette nostalgie pour une époque passée doit composer avec un élan d'avenir sans précédents, qui a guidé un changement politique des plus profonds et qui redessine depuis le territoire urbain.

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## **Le réaménagement du centre-ville du Caire, entre patrimoine et pratiques populaires**

Le quartier central Wust-al-Balad fut construit entre 1869 et 1871, par volonté du souverain de l'époque, le khédivé Ismail, qui souhaitait retrouver l'ambiance et l'architecture parisiennes au Caire (Myntti 2003). Le réseau viarie s'inspire des morphologies parisiennes et le style des immeubles, pour la plupart œuvre d'architectes étrangers, va du néoclassique, à l'Art Nouveau, au modernisme. Le quartier comprend 425 immeubles classés en raison de leur « grande valeur architecturale et patrimoniale » (El Kadi 2012, p.176). La construction de ce centre « moderne » fut un moment charnière du développement de la ville et un renforcement du pouvoir en place, non seulement par la mise en œuvre d'un projet de grande envergure, d'inspiration occidentale, mais également par le déplacement de la centralité fonctionnelle vers la centralité géographique de l'agglomération cairote.

Le centre a effectivement été un lieu phare de la culture égyptienne au début du XXe siècle. Cinémas, cafés et galeries d'arts constituent encore aujourd'hui les traces de l'internationalisation du Caire à cette époque ; au cours de son histoire, Wust-al-Balad a également été le théâtre d'appropriations politiques qui ont accompagné les principaux événements du pays. Ce rôle est actuellement exploité dans la sélection de la mémoire et dans l'instrumentalisation

*Les cairotes réinterprètent les éléments fondateurs de leur identité, nationale, politique et militante, et les spatialisent à travers la réappropriation du centre-ville.*

*L'élément nostalgique devient instrument militant pour la revendication d'une action politique actuelle*

tion du sentiment nostalgique des plus âgés. Depuis la période nassérienne des années 1950, les guerres et les migrations ont causé de grands déplacements de population, vidant progressivement le centre-ville de ses habitants aisés et des étrangers,

et conduisant à un déclin important. En raison de la présence d'activités du tertiaire supérieur et de commerces, les grands appartements bourgeois ont été morcelés pour y abriter des familles pauvres et des ateliers ; les enseignes des magasins ont progressivement dévoré les façades et les commerces informels ont densifié l'occupation des interstices urbains. La politique des baux bloqués a conduit à la dégradation du patrimoine architectural.

Le projet de réaménagement et réhabilitation du quartier fait partie de la plus large Vision Stratégique Cairo 2050, réorganisation urbaine majeure de la région du Grand Caire. Publié en 2009 par l'agence urbaine nationale General Organisation for Physical Planning (GOPP), il prévoit d'utiliser la valorisation des immeubles classés comme point de départ d'une modernisation à la fois urbaine et sociale. La rhétorique dominante dans le discours porté par le projet est de retrouver la « grandeur perdue » du quartier, qui prendrait le nom de « Caire khédivial », ainsi que son caractère international.

### **L'instrumentalisation de la nostalgie, pilier d'un urbanisme dominant**

Dans le projet pour Wust-al-Balad, l'opération de sélection de la mémoire se base sur un sentiment nostalgique qui serait propre aux Cairotes contemporains. La période identifiée comme fondatrice est la « Belle Époque » du début du XXe siècle : la construction de cette identité s'explique par des raisons politiques, esthétiques et patrimoniales. En effet, le choix de la Belle Époque relève moins de la reconnaissance d'une temporalité définie que d'un enjeu de label. À partir de plusieurs publications relatant les fastes de l'époque « khédiviale », notamment en contraste avec la politique nassérienne et successivement l'*Infitah*, la

narration de la Belle Époque entend susciter l'intérêt de l'élite égyptienne actuelle, cultivée et internationalisée. Ainsi, le quartier est doté d'une identité qui sert d'argument de patrimonialisation, et qui en même temps le différencie d'autres quartiers historiques, comme la vieille ville fatimide ou le quartier copte.

Le projet pour le quartier « khédivial », et avant tout sa narration, révèle l'ambition d'occidentalisation des pouvoirs locaux. Prônant un retour à une dénomination qui exalte ce passé d'aspiration occidentale, il préconise un nettoyage des appropriations populaires successives. Dans ce sens, la valorisation patrimoniale fonctionne en tant que sélection de la mémoire : classer les immeubles de Wust-al-Balad ne vise pas seulement à protéger une architecture jugée comme remarquable, mais plus encore à imposer une vision figée du quartier, qui incarne son désir d'internationalisation.

L'esprit cosmopolite souhaité se traduit dans une vocation du quartier comme lieu de consommation culturelle, s'opposant à la densification par les pratiques populaires visible actuellement : en effet, couplant l'intervention sur les espaces extérieurs des immeubles classés à la promotion immobilière privée, le quartier pourrait non seulement être transformé esthétiquement à des fins touristiques, mais foncièrement à des fins de développement urbain. L'affirmation de l'aménagement contemporain du « Caire khédivial » passe ainsi par le partage collectif d'une nostalgie à propos de la Belle Époque. La reconstitution – presque à l'identique – des espaces devient une opération valorisante car elle ramène à la vie une période dorée révolue. Cette vision sert également à favoriser la perception de tout ce qu'il y a eu « après » – jusqu'à la situation actuelle – comme une période d'abandon, qui peut donc être effacée sans regrets.

L'instrumentalisation de la nostalgie d'une partie de la population, qui aurait vécu une période plus heureuse que l'époque actuelle, repose sur la spatialisation des souvenirs de certains : « *le temps est toujours mémorisé non pas comme un flux, mais sous la forme de souvenirs de lieux et d'espaces dont on a fait l'expérience* » (Harvey 2010, p.268). Dans ce sens, la patrimonialisation et plus largement l'aménagement des centres autour du mythe de la grandeur perdue opèrent une spatialisation d'une mémoire sélective. La nostalgie, notion liée aux émotions des individus, devient alors un concept à mobiliser dans la construction d'une identité territoriale et individuelle (Gervais-Lambony 2003). Cette instrumentalisation des émotions ne tient pas forcément compte des différents cheminements qui conduisent à la nostalgie chez les individus, dont le dénominateur commun est le vécu. La même différence est élaborée par Boym (2001), qui identifie une nostalgie « restaurative », se concrétisant dans des projets nationalistes et conservateurs, prônant un retour au passé, et une nostalgie « réflexive », plutôt liée à la prise de conscience du temps qui passe et de l'espace qui se transforme. Si le deuxième type de nostalgie est, selon l'auteure, celui qui prépare le mieux à la construction du futur, les aménageurs caiotes manipulent le sentiment nostalgique d'une partie sélectionnée de la population, pour en faire le socle d'une mémoire collective nourrissant les projets. Ainsi, ils contribuent à la cristallisation d'un souvenir (réel ou mythifié) en l'assumant comme désir d'une condition future. Volait (2009) montre comment la rhétorique du « Caire d'autrefois » de certains individus (faisant référence à leur enfance) a alimenté une production littéraire et médiatique autour de la Belle Époque, qui s'est progressivement détachée de toute vérité historique pour devenir narration et image. Cette narration basée sur la nostalgie se traduit ensuite par des projets centrés sur la valorisation du patrimoine : le travail sur la mémoire devient alors un instrument d'action sur le présent – et le futur –, basé sur des représentations spatiales, sociales et culturelles.

Les aménageurs des centres mobilisent ainsi le registre de la nostalgie, construite en tant qu'argument de vente. Dans ce sens, Appadurai (2001) parle de « nostalgie imaginée » : non seulement l'identification d'une période historique déterminée comme particulièrement significative pour la ville sert à thématiser les opérations urbaines, mais surtout la construction d'un sens de perte chez les citoyens sert à les légitimer. Dans ce processus, le consensus est créé sur la base d'une empathie pour une période jamais vécue, mais qui, en raison de sa collocation lointaine dans le temps, est forcément considérée meilleure. Cette nostalgie, que Gervais-Lambony qualifie de « postmoderne », « se soigne à coup de patrimonialisation et de fabrication identitaire » (2012).

Ce procédé est développé dans un double sens : d'une part, la sélection de la partie du passé qui mérite d'être conservée (choix d'une époque historique, valorisation d'une identité précise, classement d'une partie du bâti) ; de l'autre, la valorisation de ce passé dans le but d'engendrer un développement futur. Ainsi, ces politiques se construisent sur un paradoxe entre « nostalgie du passé » et « modernisation ». La mise en place d'un urbanisme lié à un passé mythique peut ainsi constituer un acte profondément politique (Hocquet 2013).

### **Entre nostalgie du passé et construction du futur : l'appropriation du centre-ville après la Révolution**

La Révolution du 25 janvier 2011 a permis d'observer une appropriation de l'espace complètement renouvelée, basée non seulement sur une prise de conscience de soi de la part des citoyens, mais également sur la récupération de pratiques et de représentations de l'espace central qui étaient en sommeil. Ainsi, à travers la réappropriation des lieux-symbole du centre-ville de la part des citoyens, nous pouvons interroger la réapparition de pratiques et de réinterprétations de la mémoire constituant des ruptures dans l'instrumentalisation dominante de la nostalgie, mise en œuvre par les promoteurs privés et publics.

Depuis 2011, si la patrimonialisation des immeubles classés de Wust-al-Balad a progressivement repris, les aménageurs doivent compter avec une appropriation et une prise de conscience renouvelées de la part des citoyens. Entre autres, l'occupation de la place Tahrir soulève la question de l'identité et de la mémoire des lieux : pendant les dix-huit jours de contestations de janvier 2011, la place était devenue un véritable microcosme social où tous les citoyens semblaient se soutenir mutuellement (Al-Aswani 2011). Selon le projet gouvernemental, la place devrait subir des changements profonds, entraînant la disparition de tissus historiques porteurs de l'identité populaire, où cette mémoire révolutionnaire s'est construite. La place participe désormais de façon très importante à la construction de l'identité citoyenne, à la fois individuelle et collective, et semble vouloir résister à cette tendance à l'homogénéisation urbanistique. Le rôle joué par ce lieu ne s'arrête plus à la fonction donnée par les planificateurs, mais s'imprègne d'une symbolique, support du lien social (Agier 1999).

La place Tahrir n'est pas le seul lieu de manifestations politiques du centre-ville : la place Talaat Harb, l'immeuble de la télévision Maspero, ou encore le siège de l'ordre des journalistes ont été des lieux privilégiés des mobilisations de différents groupes politiques ou religieux. De 2011 à 2014, le pays a traversé une crise profonde : les émeutes et les ruptures politiques se sont succédées, jusqu'à la chute du président Morsi et à la répression sanglante de ses partisans en 2013. Actuellement, sous la présidence de Al-Sisi, manifester dans la rue est plus difficile et plus dangereux qu'avant, même pacifiquement.

Ce climat difficile a eu un impact important sur le paysage urbain, et en particulier sur le patrimoine : des murs cloisonnant les rues autour de la place Tahrir ont été construits par l'armée pendant les émeutes de 2011, afin de contenir les manifestants (Abaza 2013). Ces murs ont ensuite été démontés par les habitants, puis reconstruits, dans un va-et-vient entre constructions et démolitions qui voit s'opposer forces armées, militants et habitants du centre-ville. Afin de manifester leur opposition et en quelque sorte dépasser symboliquement la contrainte des murs, les militants les ont couverts de nombreux fresques et graffitis, devenus un véritable vocabulaire imagé de la contestation. Autour principalement de la satire politique et de la célébration des « martyrs » de la Révolution, les images peintes sur ces murs et sur les immeubles véhiculent des messages importants, souvent par symboles ou slogans. Malgré les opérations constantes d'effacement, les graffitis réapparaissent immédiatement, signe de « *l'émergence d'une nouvelle culture visuelle au Caire* » (CEDEJ 2013). Des organisations d'artistes militants voient le jour, comme le collectif No Walls, travaillant la peinture trompe l'œil comme ouverture de ces frontières urbaines artificielles (Stadnicki 2013). D'une manière plus générale, les appropriations de l'espace urbain pendant la Révolution au Caire sont symptomatiques du rôle fondamental joué par l'urbain dans les luttes politiques, car c'est dans l'espace public que les tensions, les conflits et les rapports de pouvoir se rendent visibles. L'occupation des espaces centraux au Caire peut alors être analysée comme une reconquête physique, symbolique et politique d'espaces en situation de marginalité, et de leur reconfiguration à travers la lutte urbaine (Memoli 2011).

Les cairotes réinterprètent les éléments fondateurs de leur identité, nationale, politique et militante, et les spatialisent à travers la réappropriation du centre-ville. L'élément nostalgique devient alors instrument militant pour la revendication d'une action politique actuelle, dans un but de construction de l'avenir. Dans ce sens, les pratiques urbaines et militantes postrévolutionnaires peuvent être lues comme des réélaborations de la mémoire par la population. Ces nouvelles visions s'opposent à la nostalgie dominante, qui voit la Belle Epoque comme une période internationale et occidentalisation à faire revivre, en gommant la réalité des pratiques urbaines actuelles et passées. Bien que les intentions d'exploitation du patrimoine par les promoteurs soient encore présentes, les réappropriations visibles depuis 2011 questionnent cette vision univoque et ouvrent à de nouveaux scénarios identitaires pour le centre-ville cairote.

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# The Limits of Nostalgia Standing on the Boardwalk with Luna Park in Mind

Juan J. Rivero

## Introduction

Coney Island, a historic amusement district<sup>1</sup> on the southern coast of Brooklyn, New York was, during the first half of the twentieth century, one of the most famous and popular recreational destinations in the world. Although its stature has since declined, a redevelopment plan announced by the City of New York in 2007 inspired a heated debate over whether and how Coney Island's historic legacy could provide the grounds for the neighborhood's revitalization. Both the City and activists who opposed the City under the name Save Coney Island (SCI) put forward plans shaped by what I call a nostalgic rationality. In this article, I examine these groups' shared nostalgic commitment and the applicability of nostalgia as a concept for understanding their engagement with the past throughout the planning process. The findings are based on interviews with thirty-five community activists and four city officials, and on analysis of reports, statements, and presentations generated by the City in connection with this project.

The first part of the article summarizes efforts to theorize nostalgia as a spatial and political process. The second part offers an overview of the redevelopment of Coney Island, providing a historical context for the project, identifying the values ascribed to the neighborhood's history by the City and by members of SCI, and explaining the source of disagreement between the groups. The concluding section considers the limitations of prevailing conceptions of nostalgia for understanding the role played by local history in these redevelopment debates. It then proposes an alternative distinction for parsing the nostalgic terms of this controversy and argues that the case of Coney Island demonstrates the advisability of taking a grounded approach to the conceptualization of nostalgia.

## Framing Nostalgia

Generally defined as a longing for the past, nostalgia has long been treated in scholarship as a process for negotiating contemporary conflicts and dislocations. The study of nostalgia has therefore looked beyond questions of historical accuracy and toward the purposes currently served by the re-excitation of idealized composites of the past. Thus framed, nostalgia

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<sup>1</sup> Luna Park was one of three large amusement parks that propelled Coney Island to international fame around the turn of the twentieth century. Its name, which honored one of the founders' sister, became an Italian term for amusement park.

concerns people's active construction of the past in the service of shaping the future and their place in it (Boym, 2002; Cunningham, 2005; Tilley, 2006). It constitutes a process of collective identity formation, defining generations (Milligan, 2003) and communities (Brown-Saracino, 2010), and providing emotional continuity to social lives (Adams and Larkham, 2015).

Because the dynamics of collective identity have spatial as well as temporal dimensions, nostalgia unfolds in the specificities of place (Tilley, 2006). It therefore offers a way to understand people's attachment to places and the process by which social history maps normative meanings onto space (Till, 2005). Nostalgia, in this telling, serves as a mythico-historical foundation for the collective articulation and pursuit of desired futures. Work dealing with such prospective impetus, however, must contend with the perception, widespread in both academic and popular usage, that nostalgia is at best an inconsequential distraction and at worst a reactionary force.

For Marxian scholars, nostalgia directs attention backwards, to obsolete material and social arrangements, and hides from sight global processes in the capitalist political economy that might provide a basis for radical action (Harvey, 1991; Williams, 1975). In one memorable formulation, nostalgia is history without the guilt (Kammen, 1993); in another, it is memory without the pain (Llowenthal, 1985). In both, it constitutes an aestheticization of the past (DeSilvey and Edensor, 2013)—a framing of tradition as settled and devoid of conflict (Massey, 1995). Nostalgically packaged, the past thus becomes available for commodification and consumption (Harvey, 1991). This may serve commercial ends; but it can also enable the imposition of dominant narratives and the depoliticization of fraught spatial practices, such as neighborhood redevelopment and nation building.

In countering the above critique, scholars have reframed nostalgia as a retrospective forging of forward-looking visions—an effort to make sense of the present and negotiate solutions to contemporary social conflicts (Boym, 2002; Cunningham, 2005; Davis, 1979; Samuel, 2012). As such, nostalgia operates as neither an inherently conservative nor progressive social force (Adams and Larkham, 2015; Samuel, 2012). Its indeterminate political content depends on “what is being remembered (or forgotten), by whom, and for what end” (Gillis, 1994, p3; quoted in Cunningham, 2005). Two distinctions provide a useful delineation of the conceptual space occupied by the politics of nostalgia.

First, Davis distinguishes nostalgia from “antiquarian feelings,” limiting the former to yearning arising from collective lived experience (and not from a mere affinity for history not lived through) (Davis, 1979). This distinction helps theorize nostalgia's political potential. According to this logic, a shared awareness of common past experience enables the emergence and local enactment of nostalgic cohorts (Milligan, 2003) that can form the basis for political action (Adams and Larkham, 2015).

Second, Boym organizes the various political orientations of nostalgia through a binary typology. Restorative nostalgia conforms to the common impression of nostalgia as a reactionary practice and denotes efforts to bring back a lost “home” or tradition—a past conceived as settled, true, and beyond dispute. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, dwells on the distance between the present and a fragmented past, using that space to mount creative and ethical challenges (Boym, 2002). Combined, both conceptual distinctions allow nostalgia to be understood as a political enterprise that might figure in debates surrounding the future of places. In the next section, I consider the role of nostalgia in one such debate, that which surrounded the redevelopment of Coney Island.

## Saving Coney Island

Coney Island is a nostalgist's playground. A pioneering seaside amusement district during the turn of the 20th century, Coney Island was for several decades one of the most renowned recreational destinations in the world. Three large, innovative, and extravagant seaside amusement parks combined with independent rides, restaurants, arcades, hotels, and theaters to occupy over one hundred acres of land. The Great Depression tempered the ambition of local attractions. The district's popularity, however, persisted, even when marching elephants gave way to pigs going down water slides. Despite the shuttering of two of the main parks and despite City interventions that reduced the footprint of the district, visitors kept coming in staggering numbers through the early 1960s<sup>2</sup>. Thereafter, a confluence of factors conspired against Coney Island's economic fortunes<sup>3</sup>. As Coney Island's popularity waned, so did its number of attractions, leaving behind large stretches of persistently vacant land. Nonetheless, the neighborhood has remained a well-frequented amusement destination and retained an iconic status in New York City history and lore.

In the absence of extensive development since the 1960s, much of Coney Island had remained a time capsule by the early 2000s, providing a tangible connection to its past. Buildings where luminaries like the Marx Brothers and Al Jolson once performed still formed part of the amusement landscape. So did longstanding rides and arcades, some of which dated back to the district's early days. Several venues made prominent reference to the neighborhood's storied past. Ruby's Bar and Grill, which had been in operation on the boardwalk since the 1930s, had a large wall display behind the bar composed of old Coney Island postcards, pictures, and memorabilia. Other establishments had made local history their main attraction. The Coney Island History Project offered walking tours, interviewed visitors for an oral history archive, and exhibited historic artifacts in its small space. Coney Island USA, the neighborhood's main arts organization, in operation since the 1980s, put on a variety of spectacles and events that reinterpreted local pre-war art forms such as freak shows and burlesque revues for contemporary audiences.

*Coney Island eludes the conventional terms of nostalgia even as it evokes the concept - even as it entails a dispute over the generative uses of local history*

Despite the activity in the district, the persistence of vacant and underutilized property led the City to formulate a redevelopment plan starting in 2007 that would upzone the amusement district, which since the 1960s had been zoned exclusively for outdoor amusement uses and one-story complementary uses. The plan would split the 40-acre district in thirds, limiting amusements to one of the thirds and outdoor amusements to a 9-acre strip sandwiched between the beach and higher density development consisting of an entertainment mall and high-rise hotels. With its plan, the City hoped to capitalize on Coney Island's historic stature, while bringing it in line with best national practices in the amusement and entertainment industries.

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<sup>2</sup> Thirty-six million visitors are estimated to have attended Coney Island in the summer of 1946 (Immerso, 2002; p163).

<sup>3</sup> These included: a growing number of competing destinations due to the increasing prevalence of automobile travel; greater access to air conditioning, which provided an alternative source of relief from summer heat; the post-war population shift toward the suburbs; the disruptions caused by urban renewal; and New York City's 1970s fiscal crisis, among others (Denson, 2004).

The City's plan inspired opposition from the disparate individuals who constituted SCI. These initially consisted of regulars who worked, lived, or sought recreation in the neighborhood, but gradually came to include a variety of people who either by dint of past visits or mere intellectual curiosity took an interest in Coney Island's future. SCI activists objected to the new dimensions of the amusement district, which they regarded as unbefitting the neighborhood's stature. They also opposed the contemplated density, which they anticipated would destroy the area's sense of openness and create an incentive for the demolition of some of the oldest remaining buildings. More generally, they regarded the plan as a threat to Coney Island historic identity and function.

Despite their differences, both the City and SCI held common views about Coney Island's historic image and its importance to future redevelopment. That image revolved around the early parks' pioneering role and innovative attractions, the size and diversity of the district's past and present crowds, and Coney Island's reputation for being a quirky, offbeat place full of unconventional characters and activities. This shared appreciation of local history, however, took on conflicting meanings, shaped by the groups' disparate ways of engaging the neighborhood (Rivero, 2016b). The City, which viewed Coney Island as a development problem, used planning analytics to study the district as a development site. While the neighborhood's image shaped this analysis, casting the district as a particular kind of site—a historic amusement destination—so did the planning analysis frame that image in terms of its value to predominant development formulas in the amusement and entertainment industry. For members of SCI, on the other hand, Coney Island's image was firmly rooted in their experience of the neighborhood. On the one hand, that image primed the activists during their visits for encounters with heritage, diversity, and the unexpected. On the other, these embodied encounters legitimated and reinforced the activists' image of historic Coney Island (ibid).

Although the plans advanced by the City and by SCI activists both arose from a shared desire to perpetuate a local tradition in amusements and recreation, the differences in the groups' engagement with local history and with the neighborhood resulted in disparate redevelopment ideas. The City looked to capitalize on Coney Island's iconicity by thematizing higher-density development and modern attractions that promised to bring the district up to industry standards. While it recognized the importance of a few local landmarks to Coney Island's image and identity, it otherwise envisioned an overhaul of the neighborhood and its "outdated" structures and uses. Members of SCI, for their part, hoped to prolong a type of experience that they regarded as a Coney Island tradition and as increasingly unavailable elsewhere in the city. This experience depended on a number of features overlooked and regarded as expendable by the City—vestigial structures, a sense of openness and accessibility, and longstanding independently-owned businesses and attractions.

### **The Limits of Nostalgia?**

The City's and SCI's visions for Coney Island shared a nostalgic basis. Despite their differences, both followed what one might call a nostalgic rationality—a logic that both values the evocation of history as a planning goal and defines what counts as historic (Rivero, 2017a). And yet, the discrepancies between the groups' plans did not break down along the categories typically associated in the literature with the politics of nostalgia.

First, the City and the activists' historical views did not, in most cases, stem from personal experience with a distant past. When they did stem from experience, it typically consisted

of visits that, however colored by local history, had transpired in recent years. Moreover, the predominant historical points of reference for both groups harked back to Coney Island's early years, which predated even the oldest SCI members by decades.

Second, the debates did not revolve around values arising from collective experience or from the enactment of collective identities (Rivero 2017b). Members of SCI did value a similar kind of Coney Island experience. But this affinity resulted from having encountered Coney Island at different points in their lives and in the neighborhood's history and from the distinct perspectives of visitors, residents, performers, or business owners, among others.

Third, the political orientation of the plans did not easily fit into restorative/reflexive or reactionary/progressive binaries. Both groups sought to restore a vision of Coney Island's past. Both reflected on local history to critically assess present circumstances and devise a plan for the neighborhood's future. Accordingly, either plan would merit either label depending on where in relation to the redevelopment one stood.

The case of Coney Island, then, eludes the conventional terms of nostalgia even as it evokes the concept—even as it entails a dispute over the generative uses of local history. As described above, the nostalgic politics of the neighborhood's redevelopment centered on epistemological differences between the contending plans. The groups' divergent ways of engaging history—as an embodied experience in the case of SCI activists and as an iconic brand in the case of the City—led to conflicting ways of valuing neighborhood features. They also inspired radically different strategies for perpetuating and building upon Coney Island's legacy. The manner of historical engagement thus constitutes a dimension of nostalgia that can prove critical to deciphering the redevelopment politics of similar projects involving "historic" resources.

The conceptual resonance of nostalgia depends on a host of factors, observes no obvious analytic boundaries, and challenges scholarship to sort out the variable particulars of each case. The case of Coney Island invites a nostalgic framing because its debates concerned the use of an outsized historic legacy as the foundation for the neighborhood's redevelopment. The terms of those debates, however, did not coincide with distinctions commonly used in the literature to parse nostalgic activity. In illustrating the variable paths along which history is projected into the future, these debates demonstrate the advisability of grounding the conceptualization of nostalgia on the specifics of the case rather than selecting specifics that correspond to prevailing conceptualizations.

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*The first part of the work is a performance that took place in an old house in a Neapolitan building of the 17th century that had to be restored. It is placed in the historical city center and it then became the artist's home-atelier.*

*A dark figure - a silhouette - with a faceless body and without identity moves itself in the rooms and interacts with the space around. Such figure takes different shapes, while started to reveal herself and cut out some empty areas.*

*By doing so, she explores the materia, the dust and the rubbles so to become part of them.*

*This human figure struggles to get her light back and to reborn through the contact with the dust and the residual materials coming from the past.*

*This action has been captured in the video In the Rubble (7').*

*The second part of the work it is the plastic reworking of the recovered materials, in particular the false ceiling*

*A complex material, which testifies a longer story and has taken deep significances charm linked to that. It is made by four layers: jute canvas, newspapers sheets, paper and plaster. The material itself is deeply symbolic and full of beauty and memories. The artistis plays firstly with these materials during the performance, by peeling off layer after layer, so to creates a story within the stories, then making the re-elaborations in a new work.*



Come lavorando sulla pelle, strato dopo strato si arriva al cuore, all'essenza dell'essere,  
così lavorando sulla materia è possibile scoprire ciò che nasconde sotto...

*Stratificazioni project by Carolina Ciuccio*

<https://carolinaciuccio.com/>

*Altro/Oltre - a photos series of false ceiling details - and*

*The repose, crossing spaces - a photos series of the spaces – are part of the project.*

*All the images here shown are made by the artist,  
except the covers' images, the photo at pag. 50-51 and the video recording (so the B/W frames), by Gianluigi Masucci.*



# Nostalgia for an imagined past

## Political ecologies of homelessness in urban public nature

**Jeff Rose**

A familiar narrative of an objectified relationship with nonhuman nature in Western thought, and especially in nature-society discourses in the United States, adheres closely to a notion of an environmental original sin. In this narrative, humans, by our very existence on the planet, have made nature dirty; we have made the natural world a little less natural. Humans have polluted, despoiled, extracted, extinguished, and unbalanced an otherwise ecologically harmonious system. Our environmental sins, however, are not solely confined to our material disturbances made upon nonhuman nature; our iniquities also include an objectification of nature, whereby through processes of science and superiority, we cast nature into an otherness where it is simultaneously romanticized, embraced, distanced, and harnessed for the powers and processes of capital. The material and discursive effects of humans make nature problematic in numerous ways.

The city serves as an intense clustering of these supposedly unnatural material artifacts and social discourses. The built world – from skyscrapers and light rail systems to manufacturing plants and toxic waste repositories – is concentrated in urban settings. Simultaneously, cities are where social interactions are most common, where interactions with diverse peoples are most likely, and where politics are expressed and decisions are made. The urban is perhaps the most fully realized articulation of human society. Work from across the social sciences, from geography, anthropology, and sociology to urban planning and environmental studies, “has classically treated the urban as an unnatural eruption out of, or as an imposition upon, pure nature” (White, Rudy, & Gareau, 2016, p. 152). Therefore, cities are regularly positioned as perhaps the least natural representations of harmonious nature-society relationships.

Political ecology, emerging from critical perspectives in geography, anthropology, development studies, activist communities, and anarchism, among others, has made substantial headway in the past three decades in disrupting these oppositional framings of nature-society relationships. There is nothing “natural” about dichotomizing nature from society, and instead these positionings are the result of political economic decisions and exercises of power. Nature is political (Robbins, 2012), and also, it is historical (Evernden, 1992). From political ecology’s earliest formulations, it was understood that “an historical perspective is indispensable” (Blaikie & Brookfield, 1987, p. xxi). Our understanding and our collective and individual positionings of nature extend from long lines of thought, knowledge production, and culturally infused assumptions, all of which are developed in ways that are contingent upon particular epistemologies and geographies. This notion that nature is politically and historically produced does not deny the materiality of the nonhuman world in which we all

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live, but it also does not subsume itself to the positivism-inspired dominance of objectivism and the super-ordinance of materialism. Neither nature nor humanity exists as a determined entity, but as coproduced actors in a complex system (Evernden, 1992). But political ecology understands the politics of nature and the environment as fundamentally linked to the politics of capital accumulation and class struggle (Robbins, 2012). In extension, urban political ecology noted that cities are heavily implicated in environmental issues across multiple scales, and are necessary for considering the possibilities of a “sustainable” future (Swyngedouw, 1996; Swyngedouw & Heynen, 2003).

Framing the urban as a shining city on the hill, juxtaposed with nature as an unspoiled wilderness until contacted with humans holds special relevance in the United States. Many of these cultural histories describe a land completely unpeopled until settler colonialists arrived, an inaccurate yet largely enshrined narrative, ignoring millennia of nature-society interactions that took place through a variety of indigenous populations. These framings of nature produced in the United States are representative of a partial, revisionist account of the past. And no rendering of U.S. nature is complete without invoking a masculine figure seeking out, subduing, and conquering the surrounding nonhuman world, seeking both economic advancement for self and community, while also understanding nature as a site of potential personal betterment and enlightenment.

This nostalgic narrative of people’s engagement with nonhuman nature is placed into tension and disruption through contemporary homelessness, when people without consistent access to private spaces in the city are forced to live, most directly, and most viscerally, among the unbuilt environment of the urban setting. While some individuals facing homelessness are able to access available shelter from friends, family, social connections, or social service agencies, an increasing number of people are living outside, where tents, tarps, and blankets serve as their only shelter (Hunter et al., 2014).

These conditions serve as the backdrop for a 16-month ethnographic study of a group of men facing homelessness who lived in the unbuilt spaces on the margins of a major U.S. city (Rose, 2013; 2017). I lived, ate, slept, worked, recreated, and commuted into the nearby city with many of the men inhabiting the space. These “Hillside residents” included approximately 24 males who have claimed space along the urban-wildland interface, with spatial access to both the unbuilt nature of extensive open space and the relative social and material advantages of contemporary city life. “Home” for the Hillside residents included tents, a cave, a small pond, cooking areas, storage areas, and even pets. Because of the topographies involved, the elevated position of the Hillside allowed for views of the urban core and even some surrounding suburbs, while also preventing the residents from being seen by nearby motorists and people living in more conventional houses and apartments. Visually, at least, it was easy to imagine that the Hillside was quite distant from the rest of the built world, on a seemingly literal frontier that harkened to a time of an imagined past. Therefore, the Hillside residents were able to “camp” with some degree of isolation from the city, while at the same time exploding the nature-society juxtaposition by commuting into the nearby city each day for food, work, services, and various social interactions.

Of the many questions that the Hillside residents’ livelihoods raised, one of them, of course, is why. Why did these men choose to live in the relatively harsh conditions of the outdoors, with driving snows of the winter, soaring heat in the summers, and all weather environments in between, when there were available shelters elsewhere? Why did they seemingly escape the spatial boundaries of the city, but only just barely, so that they could access the

unbuilt spaces of nature, but only just barely? After all, there is plenty of “nature” to be found within city limits, from traditional urban parks and greenways to vacant lots, backyard gardens, and outdoor recreational spaces. Why did the Hillside’s nature appeal more than others?

The Hillside residents’ engagement with these questions, through both participant observation and interviews, was largely based upon the Hillside’s spatial aspects. It was both an escape from the urban and an embracement of the “natural,” but at particular scales. There was a sense of security in the unmanaged nature of the nature at the Hillside, a sense of ongoing, unlimited spatial freedom, as the Hillside extended away from the city and eventually into spaces of National Forests and a complete absence of people. This spatial aspect differentiated the Hillside from typical urban parks and their more carefully managed nature. Further, this sense of scale provided by the Hillside landscape needs to be situated into sociohistorical narratives that are heavily intertwined with productions of nature. An interaction between two of the Hillside residents helps provide context for this question of why the Hillside residents were there:

Keith: What do you mean, nature? Of course it’s nature up here. Don’t it look like nature to you? Don’t you see the grasses and the dirt and the trails and all? I built that trail. The birds and the critters? All this open space out here? It sure as hell is nature to me.

Max: Hell, naw. It’s not nature; this is my home. I live here. I own this place. This is my space, that’s his space, and that’s his space over there. Each of us has our own place up here. We own it. But it ain’t nature at all. Nature is for rich people to go hike around and get the hell out of the city, to get away from their jobs and lives and kids and TV and shit. Nature ain’t really for tramps like us. . . This here is where I live, not nature.

Keith: . . . seems like nature to me. It is nature. This is where I live, and I like it. I like it lot. I’ve lived here a long time. It’s part of who I am. I like being outside and just thinking about things. That’s the only reason I’m up here, so I can keep my thoughts going, be close to the man upstairs. I wouldn’t be up here if it weren’t nature up here. Otherwise, I’d head down to the shelter in the city with those other animals down there.

Many of the residents came to the Hillside seeking this nature, whatever it meant to them. The Hillside was simultaneously a source of sustenance and a site of deprivation for the people who lived there, as they both glorified its environmental amenities, and cursed its environmental hardships. Cold, rain, wind, and meltwater were juxtaposed with pleasant, sunny days and cool relaxing evenings. The Hillside residents chose to live where they lived, in part, because of the perception of living in nature.

This nature, whatever it was to each of the Hillside residents, was distinct from the urban areas that served as a contradictory sociospatial landscape to the nearby urban. While seeking the positive benefits of “living in nature,” the residents also simultaneously infused urban areas (and the associated social services) with seemingly negative characteristics. Such a position was exemplified by Keith’s reference to social services shelters as being for “other animals.” In this case, he was referring to other individuals facing homelessness, those who did not choose to live so intensely close with unbuilt nature as Keith did. From the perspectives of the Hillside residents, their understandings of the city were aligned with many of the existing negative stereotypes that exist within the broader population. The urban, in this manner, is associated with lawlessness, impurity, and despoliation. One must escape these settings — both spatially and socially — if they are to find peace and a sense of place in the world.

All of these perspectives concerning framings of nature–society relationships – and urban–wildland juxtapositions – are largely in accordance with traditional, nostalgic renderings of a myth of the U.S. frontier. The U.S. frontier is often presented as an imagined landscape where settler colonialists moved westward across a wild, unpeopled environment, into the unknown. Embedded in this narrative are idealized versions of masculinity, individualism, determination, entrepreneurship, manifest destiny, and domination of the nonhuman natural landscape. Those hearty individuals who were able to “tame” the supposed wilds they encountered were rewarded with a high standard of living, sustained through a diligent work ethic and an up-by-the-bootstraps mentality. Perhaps counterintuitively, the eventual results of overcoming the hardships of taming nature was the construction of towns and cities, where the urban overcame and arose out of the difficulties of the unbuilt natural environment. Los Angeles, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Denver, and Dallas are ready urban examples (Abbott, 1995). Part of the myth of the U.S. frontier is the very process of urbanization, where booming metropolises were fashioned by “urban pioneers” from what were thought to be inhospitable wastelands.

The Hillside residents exist in these liminal spaces between the nostalgic framing of the frontier and the lived materialities of contemporary homelessness. A reading of their daily experiences, from camping and provisioning to their individualism and their rejection of the social status quo, are largely in keeping with a historical myth of a westward seeking, up-by-one’s-bootstraps approach to the settler mentality of white colonial expansion. The Hillside itself is the space to exercise this frontier materiality in the early 21st century. At the same time, the devastating realities of homelessness require an engagement with a contemporary urban setting that has at least some social services, however meager. The Hillside residents operate between the framing of the frontier as a space of freedom and opportunity on one hand, and the convenience, excesses, and problematics of the urban on the other. There is a longing for a (perhaps mythical) nature–society relationship of the past, yet a recognition of daily life circumstances.

*The nostalgic narrative of people’s engagement with nonhuman nature is placed into tension and disruption through contemporary homelessness*

Despite these U.S. frontier histories, and political ecology’s framing of nature–society relations as irretrievably intertwined, the pursuit and conquest of nature remains trenchant

in discourse, collective psyche, and behavior. In many ways, the perspectives, practices, and behaviors of the Hillside residents contemporarily living in public nature perpetuated particular aspects of this myth of the frontier, where a sense of engaging directly with uninhabited nature was connected to feelings of strength, individualism, and resolve, while also pointing toward complex relationships with the nearby urban core. The process of making their homes in the relative wilds of the Hillside was both anti-urban in its spatial and social rejection of the city, while also keeping with a historical, nostalgic narrative of men taming nature, in the seemingly ironic hope of making it more comfortable and more well known, somewhat like the nearby urban settings.

The Hillside residents’ interactions with, and understandings of, contemporary nature–society relationships are informative for multiple reasons. While any number of social, cultural, scientific, or even governmental artifacts or discourses could be analyzed and critiqued for considering what “nature” means (Castree, 2014), “their effect might be quite small compared with the more mundane expressions of daily life” (Evernden, 1992, p. 63). Daily life for this already marginalized population required constant negotiation between a variety

of economic, social, and political discourses. Taking control of one's life, under circumstances where so much of life felt out of control, harkened back to an imagined past where one's masculine dominance of unbuilt nature provided a sense of strength, accomplishment, and even recognition or pride.

At the same time, there is reason to also commend the Hillside residents for their relationships with the unbuilt world. A common refrain from scholars of various environmentally-focused disciplines is that poverty, in this case as exemplified by a community of individuals facing homelessness, leads to environmental destruction and despoliation, conditions which then lead to further impoverishment of the local (and perhaps global) population. This dominant narrative is often applied to countries and cultures in the Global South, though it is also targeted toward the urban realm, regardless of its empirical validity. However, this description of a downward spiraling environment-socioeconomic status nexus may be unhelpful and misleading, as it tends to overlook issues of power, access, institutions, and scale (Nunan, 2015). Relationships between poverty and nature are complex, though rarely do they acknowledge the class-based discrepancies between a supposedly benign, bourgeois, paternalistic, protectionist set of relationships and the political economic systemic advantages that produce and reproduce these perspectives. The Hillside residents provide an example of the complicated ways in which contemporary nature-society relationships pull strongly from our imaginings of our historical relationships with cities, challenges, senses of place, and the unbuilt environment.

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# Re/dis-membering industrial histories in the British North

**Andrew Wallace**  
**Katy Wright**

## **Nostalgic cities**

The two iconic blue cargo cranes that once loomed over the dockside in Salford, Northern England were demolished by the municipal authority in 2013. Dating from 1966, the loss of the cranes was lamented by local campaigners on aesthetic, heritage and political grounds. This was Salford! A city alert to its scars, where Engels, the Chartists and a radical literary canon populate the cultural memory. And yet there had been a slow-motion takeover. The docks were now 'Salford Quays' – a prestige private development of media, hospitality and real estate – and the cranes had begun, said local politicians, to 'distract from the Quays vista' (Salford Star, 2013). Any nostalgia for the cranes was misplaced, implied the authority, it was time for the city to move on. Moreover, all was not lost: those interested in accessing recreations of the cranes could now do so digitally, via a new smartphone app.

This vignette is illustrative of how planning and development decisions in post-industrial cities like Salford navigate a temporal, spatial and affective landscape produced by industrialism and a political economy which emphasizes financialized, privatized – entrepreneurial – approaches to urban growth (Harvey, 1989). Among the constituents of this complex urban scene are local people with longstanding roots in the city who wish to forge and respect particular heritage imaginaries. In the cities of Northern Britain, more often than not these are working-class communities who feel their histories being gradually expunged, sanitized or institutionalized and their identities traduced by a city government with dreams of elsewhere. How the remnants and ruins of the industrial urban past are manicured and struggled over offers an interesting case study of contemporary nostalgia and the remembering / dismembering of difficult histories.

It is said that nostalgia tends to involve smoothing over uncomfortable and unpalatable aspects of the past, being "*essentially history without guilt*" (Kannen 1991 cited in Boym 2007: 9). When we 'remember', we represent, reconstruct and forget the past in ways that have "*strategic, political and ethical consequences*" (Hodgkin & Radstone 2005: 1), for both present and future. The remnants and ruins of industrialism are an inescapable, exhilarating and ambiguous presence in the British urban North and cultures and memories of working-class life are hugely resonant. As these intersect with conditions of late capitalism and the financialization of urban development, we see nostalgic struggles unfold around dynamics of demolition, gentrification and rights to place.

According to the competitive, urban 'entrepreneurial' logic which has shaped urban develop-

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ment from the 1970s onwards (Hall and Hubbard, 1996), the materialities and histories of industrialism could not be allowed to retard capital's ability to restructure and remake the city. Municipalities responded by finding ways of either 'staging the invisibility' (Engelend et al. 2016) of those remnants, or confronting and deploying them. To smooth out these edges, nostalgia was put to work. Sometimes, demolitions and removals were the order of the day, invariably to support the next killer 'vista', whilst abandonments were engineered, moving whole swathes of cities into unruly abeyance. Typically, however, industrial infrastructure was put to work and a set of nostalgic images and narratives circulated. And so it was that many of the mills and warehouses of Leeds, Manchester and Sheffield become studios, lofts and workshops, whilst messy spaces such as Castlefield (Manchester) Kelham Island (Sheffield) and Holbeck (Leeds) were scrubbed down and recycled as 'destinations' for middle-class consumers or as hubs of 'creative' or, latterly, 'craft' production (see Aiello, 2013; Madgin, 2010). At the scale of the urban region branding, Sheffield even took the recent step of claiming industrial heritage as embedded "in the city's DNA" in promotional materials for its 'Year of Making 2016' (Sheffield Year of Making website, 2016).

It is clear that the "heritage patina [of] industrial objects, signage and built form" (Mathews and Picton 2014: 338) is firmly entrenched in the imagination of urban planners, designers and developers, both as a strategy for central-city place making and for wider city branding. The contemporary city is one that is comfortable with looking back, as long as that history acts as a springboard to the next development and growth opportunity. This, of course, invites reflections on the ramifications of a 'nostalgic city' and what is missing from its imaginaries of the past and what this tells us about a politics of urban growth so concerned with authentication. This is not to suggest that every city or urban region can (or does) mobilize and makeover its industrial heritage. The ways in which nostalgias are put to work across the urban centres of the British North reflect and underline the uneven economic geography of the UK. Appeals to industrial heritage are uneven, not least because for some areas, such as Teesside in the English North East, the process of deindustrialization is still ongoing. Meanwhile, the regional economic dominance of cities such as Manchester and Leeds leaves nearby towns with a limited ability to profit from 'remembering' (which might explain Salford City Council's willingness to remove its dockside icons).

In response to the unevenness of post-industrial development, we have seen in recent years nostalgia also infiltrating economic strategy at regional and national scales. Not all local state actors can effect nostalgia, but most are drawn into nostalgic imaginaries whether they like it or not. For example, the British government's 'Northern Powerhouse' initiative draws explicitly upon the English North's industrial past to try and inspire economic growth through targeted investment and training agendas whilst asserting a particular diagnosis of the North's pathological deficits: poor transport infrastructure, a low skilled workforce, welfare dependency and a lack of entrepreneurship. Similarly, post-Brexit, it is clear that the casting off of the stranglehold of Euro-bureaucracy is conceived by many senior politicians beset with postcolonial melancholy (Gilroy, 2005) as a moment of 'national' renewal whereupon the UK 'rediscovers' its buccaneering spirit of old, exemplified and embodied in the canals, docks and mills of Northern England; an infrastructure made possible in part by numerous colonized elsewhere.

### **Nostalgic absences**

It hardly needs to be said, then, that when industrial districts and buildings are cleaned up

and sold on, they are rarely aimed at the class which laboured in those spaces. The idealized bourgeois urban figure who can move smoothly through, between and beyond the palimpsest of urban space is fetishized, emblematic of an *amnesiac city*, which seeks to forget the foundational legacies of empire and industry – slavery, environmental contamination, exploitation, and industrial disease. Lip service is sometimes paid, of course, in a panoply of festivals, trails and memorial plaques, but a striking gap emerges between the version of industrial culture which is materialized in gentrified urban development and the complex material reality on which it draws.

As urban centres are redeveloped and industrial memories selectively heralded, in the peripheries people still live with the tumult and agony of industrial decline: redundancies, wage depression and ill health linked with heavy industrial work (musculoskeletal problems, and chronic diseases of the lungs and skin). We know now about the widespread social effects of these seismic shifts in work which undermined established social structures and mechanisms of mutual aid, disrupted shared timetables of paid and unpaid work, and fragmented social experience. In deindustrializing settings, we often see the proliferation of social problems like substance misuse, domestic violence and mental health problems, all of which are intensified by the parallel dismantling of social welfare institutions. The (often urbanized, often stigmatized) neighbourhoods in which these various processes were most keenly felt have subsequently been

the targets of successive interventions and policies aimed at addressing perceived pathologies (poor levels of ‘social capital’; a lack of ‘resilience’; cultures of worklessness; low aspirations and criminality). Local authorities struggle to find ways of tackling the ‘problem’ of the urban poor, particularly under the pressure of severe funding cuts from central government, creating a need for communities to be able to draw more effectively on their existing assets, and for interventions to do ‘more for less’.

*Amid the processes of marginalization, amnesia and elite technocracy, many who live in the post-industrial city live with an endemic sense of rupture and uncertainty*

Simultaneously, then, the post-industrial city is one that celebrates, sanitizes and marginalizes working-class and minority experience, drawing communities into a disorienting negotiation of inclusive talk and exclusionary logics. They find themselves heralded as embodying the spirit of the city (‘People Make Glasgow’ shouts that city’s latest branding effort) whilst all the while being so often rendered ‘out of place’ by the city’s planners and managers (see for example Mooney, 2009 on the relationship between capital, state and class in Glasgow).

Of course, the spatial and symbolic marginalization of working-class experience in the city is one that is repeated in non-urban contexts and can be situated in the broader structural marginality of industrial culture, history and impact. For example, it was only in 2015 that former employees of British Coal and British Steel were granted the right to make a group legal challenge for compensation for severe health problems they developed as a result of their work in dangerously dusty and fume-filled environments (South Wales Argus 2015).

### **Nostalgic communities?**

Reconstructing and remembering the industrial past often draws out unresolved antagonisms and contestations. If the practice of nostalgia within urban planning (via the reimagining, repurposing and redevelopment of industrial infrastructure) is largely driven

by commercial and aesthetic considerations as defined by developers and approved by local authorities, local people and communities have little opportunity to access and influence these systems. Grassroots campaigns to save or secure ownership of infrastructure which has both meaning and utility for local people requires the careful development of business proposals, which struggle to compete with the visions of professional developers. In any case, in the UK, urban heritage is governed by a system of 'listing' which is notoriously opaque and whilst local neighbourhood planning offers some opportunity to protect community assets, groups are well-known to be dominated by middle-class 'usual suspects' and plans must be approved by officials and deemed not to threaten strategic planning objectives such as house building.

Amid these processes of marginalization, amnesia and elite technocracy, so many who live in the post-industrial city live with an endemic sense of rupture and uncertainty (e.g. Wallace, forthcoming). Whilst nostalgic urban projects rolled out in some cities would seem to try and create a sense of continuity with history, there are many people for whom the loss of traditional industries has disrupted the reality of intergenerational continuity symbolizing disruption and loss. In response, nostalgia can be mobilized by local communities as they seek to develop their own readings of history and culture. Populations who have most fully experienced the consequences of the loss of industrial work have often been seen themselves to be nostalgic for these lost industries, evidenced for example by the lingering of industrial identities ('former mining communities') in certain neighbourhoods, and the continuing coalescing of life around the social institutions (social clubs, working men's clubs) which emerged from shared work. Rather than necessarily being attached to a particular type of work, what people appear to be nostalgic for, in an era of insecure, low-paid and precarious service sector work, is the availability of 'decent jobs' with fair terms and a degree of longevity (Shildrick et al. 2012; Wright, 2016). More often than not, those who remember the problems caused by traditional industries are highly aware of, and glad to have left behind, the kinds of negative environmental and occupational health issues that they caused, but often feel an acute sense of loss when to be working class used to be seen as making a relatively valuable contribution to family and community (see McKenzie, 2015).

In Salford, there is a sense that the municipality has a "casual disregard for the history, personality and culture of its city" (Wallace, 2014), symbolized not only in the destruction of the cranes, but in a broader agenda which appears determined to precaritize working-class communities (Wallace, forthcoming). A grassroots fight back has emerged of sorts, with various campaign groups starting to organize in the city around issues of cuts to welfare rights and 'fracking'. If nostalgia plays a role here, it appears to be for a time where 'ordinary' people had space in the city – space to work, live and rear families. The sanitization and demolition of the city's heritage landscape is simply another front in an ongoing struggle not to be evicted from the urban scene.

In general terms, perhaps it is possible to argue that working-class people continue to draw on memories in ways which lend meaning and coherence to their own lives, their social solidarities, and their current predicaments. It might be a defence against stigmatization and perceived dependency or enabling identification with a more 'respectable' identity and history. The vibrant housing activism community in the UK is perhaps an example, where after decades of defamation and residualization, a debate about the value of public housing has struggled into existence with a range of tenant activists claiming their 'right to the city' (see Watt, 2016). However, as Harvey (2013: xviii) notes, the urban working class is increasingly "fragmented and divided, multiple in its aims and needs, disorganized and fluid rather than

solidly implanted”, so perhaps lacking in the organizational/collective capacity to address shared problems or to effectively challenge marginalization. In developing their own political strategies, working-class and minority communities also have to contend with the nostalgias that are imposed on them which seek to (re)construct class and race divisions (for example, the popular conflation in the UK and US of ‘white’ with ‘working class’ and the erasure therefore of not only colonial exploitation in the ‘great’ eras which these countries are allegedly ‘returning’ to, but also the mere existence of a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) working class). There are a set of burgeoning *malign nostalgias* being put to work, in other words that any grassroots reading of history, culture and political change must address.

## Conclusion

If there are ethical consequences to how we represent and remember the past: what consequences result from the omissions and absences from the forms of urban nostalgia identified here? The nostalgic treatment of some industrial heritage tends to gloss over the story of industrial decline and the concomitant unravelling of the social structures which had built around them, and the economic shocks that decline unleashed on particular populations. It also fails to fully acknowledge the exploitation of workers that preceded their abandonment. In these ways, contemporary forms of urban nostalgia help to keep hidden some of the causes of the poverty and marginalization which persist in the present day, whilst adding little to our understanding of how people need to cope in the face of change, or how to meet the needs of deprived urban populations. Instead, communities are advised to draw inspiration from their collective experiences of resilience in the face of hardship to help them cope in the present day, even though they are being asked to do so in a very different context and with diminished collective resources. These forms of nostalgia also help to suppress critical engagement with contemporary forms of labour which characterize the contemporary city.

Potentially, the infusion of industrial nostalgia across urban life provide the middle classes with a sense of connection to civic and regional heritage. However, there is a failure to examine or acknowledge how marginalized groups are so often excluded from the new spaces created from industrial infrastructure and also lose out from the new forms of economic life envisioned in urban strategy. The past is excavated to uphold the urban ‘heritage patina’ whilst structures of exploitation, death and abandonment are obscured. We would argue this goes beyond an argument about better representation and voice – we don’t need more apps, museums and walking tours – and reflects a deeper disregard for subaltern urban experience. As decent work and respectful welfare disappears, the struggle to remember and make sense of the histories, materialities and relations which constitute that experience within the city is now here.

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**lo Squaderno 43**

***Urban nostalgia. Between radical and reactionary imaginaries***

**edited by //**

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**Guest Artist // Carolina Ciuccio**



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