America's Oblivion: Preservation in the Age of Erasure

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AMERICA’S OBLIVION
PRESERVATION IN THE AGE OF ERASURE
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Chronological Juxtaposition | Fig. 01 | Temporal framework that reveals the obscured histories of Knoxville’s Market Square and the pervading conditions of oblivion.
America’s racial heritage, a crucial component of the nation’s identity, has fallen to a condition of pervasive forgetfulness exacerbated by the strains of modernity and memory erasure. The increasing speed of travel renders historical markers and plaques obsolete, their elucidating texts consigned to a blur on a highway. The internet offers unparalleled access to data while also burying critical moments of American history with a barrage of sensory stimulation. With the growing speed and scale of the human experience, remembrance is now the exception against the increasing collective forgetfulness, or oblivion. This project explores the ways in which architecture and infrastructure can help curate this oblivion by addressing America’s legacy of racial terrorism and violence.

Whether it is the exclusion of the Japanese-American Internment from 20th-century history books or the discrepancy between the number of monuments honoring the confederacy and those remembering racial oppression, the role of race in American culture is systematically subdued at every opportunity. Paired with the continuing occurrence of racial atrocities within the United States, America’s need for memory-attuned infrastructure is clear.

So, what is the architect’s role in curating America’s legacy of racial terrorism?

Above all else, architects are engineers of experiences. Experiences are essential to the creation of individual memories, and the amalgamation of individual memories generates and sustains culture. This places architects at a key moment of intervention in the creation of memories and the maintenance of culture. This project seeks to answer fundamental questions such as:

+ How can architecture recover forgotten moments to sustain culture?
+ In what ways can design use the increasing speed of transportation and data against itself to create moments of pause that stand out against the pervasive background of oblivion?
+ Under what circumstances is oblivion a positive condition?

Discussions of America’s Oblivion are just beginning to surface in the contemporary architectural discourse. Michael Murphy, lead designer of the new Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama, notes that “Buildings make visible our personal and our collective aspirations as a society... Great architecture can heal.” This proposal identifies the potential architectural strategies through which the issues of America’s Oblivion may be addressed.
ARGUMENTATIVE ARMATURE

ESSENTIAL INQUIRY: As the scope of the human experience increases and forgetfulness becomes the normative condition, what is the architect’s role in curating America’s legacy of racial terrorism and violence?

This essential question raises other concerns. Where does oblivion occur? In what situations is forgetfulness a positive condition? How are the most memorable moments created? How can architecture break through the barrier of oblivion to access the broader public memory and begin to address culture? Culture evolves just like an organism, so how can a building that is locked in the present interact with cultural criteria of the past and anticipate its evolution in the future? What are the relevant applications of such research? Exploring these questions through preliminary research and varied methodologies was a key goal of developing the project’s argumentative framework.
View of lantern ceremony at the 72nd anniversary of the world’s first use of a nuclear weapon on a civilian target in Hiroshima, Japan.

THE NATURE OF MEMORY

It is impossible to raise the discussion of oblivion without first understanding memory. Individual experiences are the catalyst behind memory; they are the framework for phenomena like nostalgia and déjà vu, and they greatly affect the experience of architecture. Every visitor brings his or her own memory-laden baggage into an architectural space.

While the smell of burnt coffee may only singe the nostrils of some, others are reminded of late nights and adolescence. An empty field may be devoid of emotional registration to some, while others see the peeling paint and dishevelled bricks of the house of their youth. These memory connections are the framework behind all human experiences, both architectural and non-architectural.

EXPERIENTIAL DISLODGEMENT

Andrei Tarkovsky explores the fragmentary and associative properties of memory in his film Nostalghia. In this film, the protagonist Andrei struggles with pangs of longing for home as he travels to Italy for work. Throughout his journey, various elements of a scene such as the sound of rain, presence of a flame, or the appearance of a woman dislodge Andrei from his immediate surroundings, placing him into a memory sequence where the boundaries of reality are difficult to discern. Though clearly an artistic work of fiction, Tarkovsky probes the experiential nature of memory (fragmented, associative, and phenomenological) and how easily it can be triggered. How can this tactic of dislodgement be utilized in architecture to combat the effects of America’s Oblivion? This question became essential to all phases of the project.

In the final scene of Nostalghia, Andrei finds himself in front of his Russian home (fig. 05). Over the course of two minutes, the camera slowly pulls out to reveal that Andrei’s memory of his home has been intersected with the memory of an ancient derelict cathedral. This scene exhibits the palimpsestuous nature of memory and architecture, which became a motif throughout the various phases of the project.
Experiential Palimpsest | Fig. 05 | Still from Andrei Tarkovsky’s *Nostalghia* (1983) showcasing a moment of experiential fragmentation
THE NATURE OF OBLIVION

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE | HISTORICAL APPLICATIONS
The culture of ancient Rome was one that was steeped in rituals and practices surrounding memory, the most influential of which is the concept of damnatio memoriae. Literally translated as the “condemnation of memory”, this term describes the Roman practice of influencing the public’s collective memory by augmenting their own history.

To Romans, the memories shared by the populace were equitable to the legacy of the empire. For this reason, the Roman government went to great lengths to censor this collective memory though the process of memory sanctions. In her seminal work The Art of Forgetting: Disgrace and Oblivion in Roman Political Culture, Harriet Flower describes memory sanctions as “deliberately designed strategies that aim to change the picture of the past, whether through erasure or redefinition, or by means of both.”¹ This practice continued into modernity and has greatly affected the landscape of America’s collective memory.

Flower notes the following about oblivion’s relationship to memory: “In Roman thought, memory was not taken for granted as a natural state or product. Rather, oblivion was considered the more normal condition...”² This confers with the idea that memory, not oblivion, is the exception. In this way, oblivion becomes the positive in a figure-ground plan, while memory is the scant white space that denotes void. This begs the essential question: if oblivion is the constant, how can architects design with oblivion in mind to heighten the awareness of occupants and sustain cultural heritage at large?

For the purposes of this analysis, this disconnect from the past is referred to as Past Oblivion, and it is one of three symbiotic branches of oblivion.

¹. Harriet Flower, The Art of Forgetting, 2.
². Ibid., 5.
Severan family’s damnatio memoriae | Geta, originally pictured bottom left, suffered damnatio memoriae by after being assassinated in the second century C.E.
PAST OBLIVION

DAMNATIO MEMORIAE | CONTEMPORARY APPLICATIONS

Though damnatio memoriae began in antiquity, its use continued throughout history in varying ways. Perhaps the clearest examples of memory erasure within modern history is found in images like those at right. In this image, Joseph Stalin stands next to Nikolai Yezhov, leader of the Russian NKVD (secret police force) during the “Great Purge” of 1936-1938. In this politically and socially volatile movement, the NKVD under Yezhov’s direction was responsible for the execution of nearly 700,000 “enemy of the people.”

As word of the excessive force and brutality of this endeavour spread, Stalin distanced himself from Yezhov who began to fall from favor. Yezhov was eventually executed himself, and, as can be seen at right, his memory was erased from documents and photographs.

The use of damnatio memoriae was not restricted to blatant applications in foreign dictatorships; examples of memory augmentation and erasure abound in the history of America as well. From contemporary textbooks softening the detriments of America’s slave trade to the early film industry to current issues regarding “fake news”, America’s history of altering public memory is one of ambiguity and difficulty.

The image at left is the theatrical release poster from D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, one of the first full-length feature films. The film is viewed by many contemporaries to be one that paints a “romantic, glowing, and heroic” image of the American South and the Ku Klux Klan, and some even claim that it was a major influence on the rebirth of the KKK.

These travesties that re-engineer public memory shape the American ethos. Though oblivion is not always negative, the overarching implications of America’s Oblivion are malignant in nature. Society cannot move forward if it is enslaved by the unaddressed atrocities of its history. This truth is demonstrated by other nations whose responses to national tragedy should act as precedent for America’s memory-attuned infrastructure.

4. William Zimmerman, Ruling Russia, 109, 120.
5. Ibid., 127.
Contemporary applications of *damnatio memoriae* | Fig. 09 | Joseph Stalin + Nikolai Yezhov circa 1940, with Yezhov being erased after he fell from favor.
PRESENT OBLIVION

In contrast to the systematic nature of Past Oblivion, oblivion of the present is passive in nature. Present Oblivion is omnipresent, pervading daily experiences through subtle phenomenological channels.

This is represented in the augmented stills from Inception at right. In this scene, oblivion is the mirror – the opaque veneer that separates the present from the past. Architect Juhani Pallasma describes this condition in his book The Thinking Hand, stating that “the boundary between the self and the world... as we construct our self-made world, we construct projections and metaphors of our own mindscapes.” This barrier between the “self and the world” can be broken at any moment (as it was for Andre in Nostalghia) and increase the scale of the human experience, dislodging someone from the present. How can architecture facilitate this benign dislodgement?

8. Juhani Pallasmaa, The Thinking Hand
The veneer of experiential dislodgement | Fig. 11 | Modified stills from *Inception*, directed by Christopher Nolan (2010)
POTENTIAL OBLIVION

CULTURAL PRESERVATION
While Past and Present Oblivion are observable phenomena, Potential Oblivion is less evident and more difficult to study. Potential Oblivion refers to any condition where the dangers of erasure, suppression, or forgetfulness are imminent, though the effects on the object or culture may not yet be evident.

Due to its anticipatory state, Potential Oblivion is more difficult to locate and prevent, though the images at right identify potential sites of this oblivion. The stolid void left by the Buddha of Bamiyan after its destruction by religious fundamentalists (fig. 11) is indicative of an aggressive human-caused form of Potential Oblivion. The sequence to Candi Pendem in Indonesia (fig. 12), which is concealed behind dense tropical brush, domestic development, and farmland, showcases how memories can become physically buried over time. The Temple of Santiago and the Ciliwung River (figs. 13-14) represent a Potential Oblivion spurred by climate change, as droughts, floods, and pollution augment both the temple and the river.
These sites are still intact, preserving and impacting the cultures of the communities around them. But what will happen when the cliff face of the Bamiyan site erodes away or collapses over the millennia? Many residents of Indonesia are not even aware of the 1,200 year old temple that hides in the brush. What will become of the structure as it continues to fade from the public memory? Human impact on the Earth’s climate is a fact of increasing relevance. What will happen to the memories of the Temple of Santiago when it is permanently submerged (or revealed) in the coming centuries? How will the communities along the Ciliwung River be remembered as they are obliterated by the increasingly voracious floods of Jakarta?

What is architecture’s role in combating this imminent oblivion? In answering this question various strategies such as chronological juxtaposition and experiential dislodgement arose as motifs that would guide the project.
REVEALING OBLIVION IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Whether through the parasitization of existing infrastructure or the application of latex to walls and sculptures, the methods of combating oblivion are as nuanced as the issue itself. The following examples are helpful in framing this project on America’s Oblivion and served as precedent throughout the process.

Following the tragedy of the Holocaust, museums, memorials, and other forms of historical markers populated the German landscape, making it impossible to visit the country without understanding this pivotal chapter in its history. Guenther Demnig, a German artist and sculptor, designed bronze bricks that he inserted into the existing paving of Berlin. These “Stumbling Blocks” are Demnig’s critique of other memorials that “you have to make the decision to visit... But not with the stumbling blocks. Suddenly they are right there in front of you.” 9 This method of parasitizing existing infrastructure through discreet interventions became an important tactic in the design proposal that serves as the deliverable for this project.

Elsewhere in the realm of art, Jorge Otero-Pailos’ latex casts visualize the palimpsestuous nature of memory and the built environment. Otero-Pailos’ casts remove the pollution, graffiti, and other artifacts from the walls of various structures (including Westminster Hall, at right) and physically manifest them within the space, making the history of the structure inhabitable.

Domestically, MASS Design Group’s Memorial to Peace and Justice is a critical first step in America’s reconciliation with its dark history. While the museum is a brave intervention that excellently combats the effects of America’s Oblivion, Demnig’s critique of the German memorials (that “you have to make the decision to visit”) could also be applied to this memorial. So how can architects parasitize preexisting infrastructures to create interventions that challenge the preconceived notions of the historical

Critiquing the Historical Marker | Figs. 16-18 | Sculptor Guenther Demnig’s markers in Berlin are integrated into pre-existing urban infrastructure. Jorge Otero-Pailos’ latex installations visualize the palimpsestuous nature of memory. Mass Design Group’s Memorial to Peace and Justice in Montgomery, AL is an armature for memory rituals.
The contemporary effects of Past Oblivion are evident in American current events. The domestic terrorist attacks in Charleston, South Carolina, the Black Lives Matter Movement, and the potential overturning of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) are rooted in the country’s identity. Below are three examples of memory augmentation, whether intentional or not, that have altered American race relations in the 20th and 21st centuries.

D. W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation: Released in 1915, Birth of a Nation was one of America’s first blockbuster films. In it, African American males are depicted as violent individuals that pose a sexual threat to white women. The Ku Klux Klan is depicted in a heroic light, with the “knights” saving white women from peril on multiple occasions. President Woodrow Wilson showed the film in the White House, calling it “history written in lightning.” Given the chronological proximity of this to the Red Summer only four years later, I propose that the memory augmentation present in the American film industry and media had a profound effect on the race relations of the time period.

Slavery and the Legacy of Lynching: America’s legacy of slavery accompanied by the lynchings from the late 19th to mid-20th centuries is perhaps the most profoundly potent legacy in American history. Moreover, the division between these important historical events and their representation in the modern historical discourse is troubling. While there are thousands of monuments to the confederacy, slavery monuments and markers for lynchings are shockingly scant. In addition to this, contemporary textbooks from popular publishers (namely McGraw Hill) have even adopted softer language when discussing slavery. The effect of this on the current racial discourse in America is evidenced by the recent increases in tensions and violence.

Japanese-American Internment Campus (1940s): Beginning with Executive Order 9066 in 1942, Japanese Americans were forcefully evicted from their homes, placed on trains, and transported to internment campus. Despite the clear infringement on constitutional rights and the parallel with German holocaust methodologies, this event was absent from textbooks until the 1970s (over 30 years after the events took place). This created a gap in the public memory, subduing the role of the interment camps within American memory.

With such clear evidence of memory augmentation and oblivion in American history, can architecture help to mitigate this oblivion and allay some of the current issues in race relations?

Augmented Identity | Figs. 19-21 | Theatrical poster for Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, image of lynching of Laura and L.D. Nelson, Ansel Adam’s photograph of the Japanese American Internment Camp at Manzanar
AMERICA'S DISCONNECT FROM ITS IDENTITY

HOW MUCH SHOULD HISTORY INFORM OUR DAILY LIVES?
The difficulties of answering this apparently quantitative inquiry are being demonstrated in American current events. Whose memory from the Civil War should be preserved in contemporary statuary? Does the flag of a fallen nation with a history of slavery and human trafficking belong on bumper stickers and in political rallies? When is it best to remember? When is it best to temporarily forget and be free of historical burden?

Most importantly for this project, what is architecture’s role in this discourse?

Given the natures of memory and oblivion, the malignant consequences of forgetting, and the superior precedents set by those concerned about memory, I contend that it is the architect’s responsibility to help curate America’s legacy of racial terrorism by creating new types of memory infrastructure that facilitate reparative conversations.

With this in mind, various methodologies were deployed throughout the period of study to investigate and visualize the complexities of America’s Oblivion. The project primarily operates as a critique of cartography (the way data is visualized and understood) and a critique of the historical marker (memory-attuned infrastructure). The purpose of this project and its proposed interventions is to instigate the reparative conversations necessary for progression, both within the architectural profession and without.
Density of Discrimination | Fig. 28 | This map (produced early in the course of research) represents areas of increased racial violence in the form of lynchings from 1900 - 1931. Visually, epicenters of hostility and historical recognition become evident.
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Fig. 23: 1941 Detroit race riots, open source image.

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Fig. 25-26: Chicago race riots of 1919, Open source image.

Fig. 27: Open source image.

Fig. 28: Map is original creation of the author, with information from the Tuskegee Institute Research Department and the Equal Justice Initiative
Where does oblivion occur within the built environment and what are the architectural tactics that affect it?

Methodologies of documentary filmmaking, experiential mapping, long-exposure photography, and precision erasure were deployed throughout the course of research to help answer this essential inquiry.
CHRONOLOGICAL JUXTAPOSITION

One of the clearest ways that the complexity of American identity can be observed is through a strategy of **chronological juxtaposition**. Chronological juxtaposition describes the method by which temporal apertures are opened in a spatially consistent scene. In this way, the familiar three dimensional coordinates of space become distorted by a fourth set of “coordinates” that is rarely considered – time. This strategy reveals the historic complexities that have created a place and can be used to identify Past, Present, or Potential Oblivion at a given site.

The image at right is of the most famous public space of Knoxville, Tennessee, Market Square. This sociocultural hub of Knoxville’s central business district is host to numerous shops, restaurants, public events, and even a few historic landmarks commemorating Women’s Suffrage. Upon deploying the strategy of chronological juxtaposition, the full history of Market Square becomes observable, including the tumultuous events of the Red Summer of 1919.

One of the darker moments in American history between the abolition of slavery and the Civil Rights movement, the Red Summer was filled with volatile race riots in over 35 US cities.¹ Knoxville did not escape this epidemic. In late August of 1919, a **5,000 strong lynch mob stormed Market Square** in search of Maurice Mays, a black man accused of murdering a white woman named Bertie Lindsey. The riot grew in ferocity, releasing other white prisoners (some of which were convicted of murder) while combing the city for Mays. The mob converged on the historically black district of town when the National Guard stepped in, setting up two machine guns at the intersection of Vine and Central Avenue. The fighting continued into the night. The number of dead was never confirmed, though the violence was widespread.²

While Mays was not lynched by the mob that night, he was eventually convicted and sentenced to death, despite the shoddy nature of the trial (which included a Supreme Court overruling on grounds of mistrial). He is buried in an unmarked grave at Odd Fellows Cemetery in Knoxville.³ This is a single story in a summer of over 47 lynchings (including four white men) and numerous riot-related deaths in 36 other cities.⁴ Nevertheless, this story has faded into the confines of Past Oblivion. **How could remembrance of stories like this and the Red Summer augment current race relations in the United States?**

The site of Market Square is especially poignant, as it presents the difficulty with oblivion. Since the square is such an important space in the city, how should this tragic event be commemorated? **Is this an instance when oblivion is a positive condition?**

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³ Ibid., 29-33.
Chronological Juxtaposition of Market Square | Fig. 01 | Composition showcases the chronological complexity of many of America’s public spaces, including Market Square in Knoxville. This methodology was created with inspiration from Richard McGuire’s *Here*. 
ARCHITECTURE OF DISLODGEMENT

As the engineers of experiences, architects are often positioned to create moments of experiential dislodgement. Experiential dislodgement describes the condition whereby individuals are exposed to sensory or cognitive stimuli that extricate them from their present state of awareness. Moreover, this dislodgement is crucial to mitigating the effects of oblivion, especially Past and Present Oblivion.

Over the course of research, architectural tactics such as dramatic shifts in scale, strategic erasure, temporal juxtaposition, enhanced tactility, and designing for speed were identified as essential ways of creating this dislodgement. This research overlapped with the core themes of sacred architecture. For this reason, religious structures became valuable precedents to better understand how architecture facilitates this dislodgement. The most important findings of this research are summarized in the following pages.
Experiential dislodgement through tactile interaction with time | Fig. 03 | View of pilgrim offering votive candle at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. This allows pilgrims to interact with physical traces of pilgrims that came before them, dislodging them from their own timeline and expanding the experiential scale of the church.
CASE STUDY | Experiential Dislodgement

CHURCH OF THE HOLY SEPULCHRE
Jerusalem, Israel | 4th Century CE

Located in the Christian Quarter of Jerusalem’s Old City, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre is a complex specimen of architecture that augments the situational awareness of its visitors through experiential dislodgement. By shifting experiential scales through moments of tactility and creating situations that expand the pilgrims’ understanding of their physical, historical, and spiritual contexts, the church dislodges pilgrims from their normative experiential sequence. In this way, the church is able to facilitate the generation of potent individual memories while also acquainting contemporary pilgrims with the collective memory of those that came before them.

This is achieved through two primary architectural strategies: the juxtaposition of light and darkness, and creating moments of tactile interaction with history.

9. Highlighting the Stone of Unction is significant, as it honors the embalmment of Jesus of Nazareth.

Shifting experiential scales | Fig. 04 | View of Church of the Holy Sepulchre’s entry sequence, which greatly contrasts the compressive streets of Jerusalem’s Old City.
Upon entering the church, visitors are denied visual access to any architectural features other than those illuminated by the light streaming in from the main doors. The Stone of Unction is directly on axis with the main portal and marks the farthest extent of the light’s reach. The surrounding darkness creates momentary tunnel vision within the visitor, with the Stone of Unction as the focal point. This strategic use of darkness focuses pilgrims’ attention, creating moments of pause following the highly kinetic procession to the church.

The architecture also acts as an armature for time, creating moments of tactility that expand the pilgrims’ experience beyond themselves. From the Medieval graffiti that guides the procession to the basins that receive votive candles, the architecture of the church allows pilgrims to interact with one another across time. Since this chronological separation is a key issue in oblivion, learning how structures such as this dilate visitors’ sense of time is critically important. Light and dark, tactile interactions, and moments of pause are deployable strategies in addressing oblivion.
PADRE PIO PILGRIMAGE CHURCH
Architect: Renzo Piano
San Giovanni Rotondo, Italy | 2004

Renzo Piano’s solution for a pilgrimage church in rural southern Italy offers an antithesis to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. While the Church of the Holy Sepulchre created moments of dislodgement through darkness and moments of pause, Padre Pio Pilgrimage Church thrives on perpetual motion, large amounts of light, and restrained allusions to nature. Piano’s church sustains experiential dislodgement by juxtaposing the natural landscape with his highly designed landscape.

The effect of this juxtaposition highlights another key tactic to creating moments of dislodgement: dramatic shifts in scale.
At the scale of the site, Piano’s creation of an artificial plateau within the geological plateau of Mt. Gargano allows the visitor to inhabit spaces of varying experiential scales simultaneously. This comparison of experiential scales jars visitors’ from their current state of awareness. As previously discussed, it is these shifts in spatial, historical, or contextual awareness that combat the numbing effects of oblivion most effectively. This experiential jarring is a tactic Piano deploys elsewhere in the design.

In addition to using the landscape to create these shifts in scale, Piano also utilizes light to distort pilgrims’ understanding of time. Throughout much of the day, the interior of the sanctuary is washed with ubiquitous light that is strategically refracted from the piazza. This combined with the absence of natural light in the sacred crypt below the church distort visitors’ perception of time, making their return to the sunlit piazza chronologically jarring. Shifting scales of both architectural elements and the individual’s sense of time can be useful methods by which to address oblivion.
After analyzing these sacred structures and reflecting upon my travels, I realized that one of the most difficult tasks in the analysis of oblivion is pinpointing where oblivion occurs. To explore this, I looked back upon my travels, deploying a method of experiential mapping that represented each location in the way that I experienced them. This methodology made many of my maps geographically inaccurate, but experientially potent. In generating the maps, I utilized both digital and analogue techniques to parallel the ways that architecture can be experienced. The results were useful and began to delineate the nature of oblivion as well as the difficulty in tracking it.

The image at right is representative of my entire trip, from Poland to Israel, followed by Italy, Indonesia, and Japan. Through this map, I discovered that the potency of experience is directly proportional to the novelty of the experience (which creates dislodgement) and amount of time spent in a place. Understanding these cornerstones of memory will be useful moving forward as I try to explore architecture’s role in memories and oblivion.
Density of Memory | Fig. 22 | This analogue map expresses my own memories of Hiroshima, Japan. As displayed by the scant detail following the high speed rail (left in image, near compass), speed seems directly proportional to oblivion.
Juxtaposition: Remembered versus Actual  

This digital rendition represents the actual map of Hiroshima, with lodging areas highlighted and trajectories documented. Discrepancies between the analogue and the digital map showcase moments of numbing or forgetfulness.
EXPERIENTIAL MAPPING | Speed + Texture

Designing for Speed | Figs. 24-26 | Long-exposure photography helped identify the need to design for speed. Historical markers along highways are clearly obsolete – consigned to a blur. With the increasing speed of travel, how should the historical marker respond?
In this study, the overlapping of individual moments can be observed – vague afterimages juxtaposed against vibrant sparks of memory. These are the qualitative aspects of normative experiences. **How can architecture use the speed of transportation and data against itself to create pockets of heightened awareness?**
These collages represent explorations into perception and speed as they relate to oblivion. The above image is representative of the kinetic experience of Highway 70. The voids that run throughout the composition indicate the rhythm of the corridor, which is more sporadic than the consistent rhythm of Interstate 40. The scenes are more disjointed, making the overall memory of the excursion muddled. How is the architect to design for this kind of experiential corridor?

This study identified the importance of processional texture and its effects on memory and oblivion, heavily influencing the design proposal.
DATA MAPPING | Cartographic Models

Exploring different methods of cartography was essential throughout the project. Representing different datasets as a palimpsest helped make spatial and historical connections that may have otherwise been missed (such as the connection between railroads, rivers, and the propagation of slavery in the south). The density of injustice and racial atrocities along with railway, river, and roadway infrastructures became guiding datasets for the project that heavily influenced the ensuing design proposal. Graphically, the juxtaposition and inversion of white and black became a recurring tactic throughout the project as it visually reinforced the thematic motifs of juxtaposition and void.

Palimpsestuous Cartography | Fig. 30 | This map of Tennessee demonstrates how juxtaposition of data can enhance cartography. The base (rightmost) layer of racial atrocities and infrastructural lines is projected through various filters to create the topographical representation (leftmost) that visualizes "peaks" and "valleys" within the data.
Implications of Inversion | Fig. 31 | This modified map from a 1860 census showcases the relationship between natural and manmade infrastructures (river + rail) and the spread of slavery in the south. The "whiteness" of the counties is indicative of the percentage of slaves in that county.
Erasure can take many forms, but subtraction via burning best approximates the complex structure of oblivion. Unlike drilling, cutting, sanding, and other means of erasure, burning chemically changes a material and transforms that which is subtracted into a new substance. Like oblivion, the omitted material can never be recovered in its original form; the evidence of burning will always remain, and some of the material will remain unrecoverable. This is the nature of oblivion. From names and dates to buildings and events, that which is forgotten cannot maintain its original "chemical composition".

For these reasons, burning became a primary method of diagramming and analyzing maps, models, and other artifacts produced during the course of research. Although architecture cannot recover memories as they originally existed, this project proposes various methods through which built interventions can recover as much "memory material" as possible.

The Inferno | Figs. 32-35 | The first three images represent early attempts to control the precision of the pyrotechnic subtraction. Once "refined" (fire is unrefinable, to an extent), these methods were applied to various models and maps to represent oblivion within the American cultural landscape.
This model visualizes America's Oblivion. Here, a deeply charred, fissured, and eroded American landscape (wood) is separated from the more "proper" America (chip board) by a veneer of oblivion (warped plexiglass), distorted by the heat of the tumultuous history below.
These early models explore potential pathways through the state as created by preexisting infrastructure and Tennessee’s geolocated history of racial oppression. This notion of a pathway through the state, defined as the zone of erased counties, became central to the design proposal.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


IMAGE CITATIONS

Figs. 01-30: photos and artifacts by author.
Fig. 31: Map is the original creation of the author, with information and underlay from the US Department of the Interior.
Figs. 32-40: photos and artifacts by author.
DESIGN PROPOSAL
AMERICA'S OBLIVION | Preservation in the Age of Erasure

America's history of racial terrorism and violence is beginning to repeat itself, as all histories do when left unattended. 100 years after the Red Summer of 1919, Ferguson erupted in flames, Charlottesville was plagued by domestic terror, supremacist groups increase presence on college campuses, and dozens of cities are plagued by racially-charged riots and protests. Jim Crow Legislation is replaced by "stop and frisk" policies and a broken system of mass incarceration where "wealth—not culpability—shapes outcomes." Confederate monuments continue to proliferate while the 4,000+ reported victims of lynching go largely unrepresented.

America lacks the crucial memory-attuned infrastructure that other countries possess. This project posits new types of infrastructures designed to facilitate reparative conversations in the American cultural and architectural discourse.

By situating various interventions along a pathway through the state of Tennessee connected by preexisting infrastructure and sites of memory, I propose a kind of pilgrimage experience through which the populace can interact with the spatialized history of America. This is achieved by creating interventions that combat the effects of Present, Past, and Potential Oblivion while parasitizing preexisting infrastructures for their historical and institutional significance.

Whether it is the rivers and abandoned railroads that acted as channels for both enslavement and liberation or the bridges across the state that served as armatures for lynching, the latent historical and spatial significance of Tennessee’s infrastructure greatly influenced the design response.

The project was ultimately designed for display in the University of Tennessee’s Ewing Gallery of Art + Architecture in the spring of 2018, where it remained on display into the summer of the same year, catalyzing conversations.

1. Stevenson, Bryan, "We Need to Talk about an Injustice." TED Talks, March 05, 2016.
FINDING THE PATH

Identifying the Path through the state was the result of months of research on 19th century infrastructure in America along with the scars left by terror lynchings and institutional slavery. Using data collected from the Equal Justice Initiative, ArcGIS, and the US Department of the Interior, the counties below were selected as territories for operation. This selection was based on the concentration of slaves by county, points of racial terror, and important infrastructure such as the Memphis-Ohio Railroad, Louisville-Nashville Railroad, Tennessee River, and Cumberland River.

Though in reality the Path more closely follows river and rail lines, the corridor is abstracted by the superimposed blue line. The burned (black) counties are where the three proposed design interventions take place.
The ensuing design interventions should be understood as samples from a larger network of interventions along the Path. Due to the finite nature of the project, three key sites and scenarios were identified to represent the potential along the rest of the Path. Each intervention is inextricably tethered to the history of the site and the immediate region while also addressing the three key modes of oblivion: past, present, and potential. The proposed memory infrastructure architecturalizes the methodologies and motifs established throughout the course of research.
Situated on an abandoned segment of the Memphis-Ohio Railroad, this intervention implements enhanced tactility and spatialized history to mitigate the numbing effects of Past Oblivion. The map at left provides a more detailed understanding of the larger map on the previous page, showcasing the various layers of data that informed the creation of the Path. Here, the longitudinal registration (vertical lines) of the 235 lynchings in Tennessee visualizes the morbid rhythm of the state’s history. While many of these victims are known, some have been permanently lost to the char of oblivion. This intervention takes place where these registrations intersect with the Memphis-Ohio Railroad.

**Chronological juxtaposition** through a tactic of temporal apertures remains an important method of exhibiting oblivion. In the view at left, the vertical component of the intervention is visible. This tower acts as a visual registration of a lynching that occurred within the county as well as a point of data collection. In this way, verticality denotes proximity, enhancing the tower’s function as a beacon.
The focal point of this intervention is the **removal of a rail tie in accordance with the longitudinal registration of a lynching in the state**. A rail tie is removed whenever the path intersects with the longitude of one of the state’s **235 lynchings**. The coordinates of this atrocity as well as the complex narratives that accompanied the event are inscribed on multiple layers of plexiglass that are placed on top of the void. This equips pilgrims with various means by which to access the original site. The rail tie itself is replaced by an aluminum cast of the original tie, replacing the rotting wood with a pristine piece of polished aluminum, signifying significance. The original tie is removed from the site and implemented in the Nashvillian intervention. **Erasure and supplantation** are important tactics elsewhere in the project.

At right, infrastructural artifacts such as boxcars are reused as digital and analogue archives for the Path. Some boxcar interiors are charred so that pilgrims might leave their mark, while others function as digital storehouses for recorded narratives.
Enhanced Tactility | Figs. 03-04 | This intervention’s potency is dependent on pilgrim’s tactile interactions with the site. From the haptic registration along the trail that signifies the removal of a rail tie to the boxcars that become archives for data and graffiti alike, this memory infrastructure operates in different scales of tactility.
This intervention focuses on speed's relationship with Oblivion. Situated on the Woodland Street Bridge spanning over the Cumberland River in Nashville, TN, this parasitic infrastructure utilizes the speed of highway traffic to counteract the numbing effects of Present Oblivion. Based on the concept of the zoetrope (a primitive "moving picture machine"), the spacing of the cantilevered artifacts is attuned to the 45 miles-per-hour traffic that traverses the bridge. Although details are impossible to discern at this speed, the blackness and rhythm of this intervention break up the monotony of the normative commute and parse the views of the city, calling attention to the infrastructure’s important function as a historical marker of lynchings.

The map at left identifies the bridge (white) and key structures surrounding the initial site, including the Davidson County Courthouse, the "Batman" Building, and Nissan Stadium.

The time-lapse studies of Highway 70 were essential to the creation of this memory infrastructure as they permitted a more nuanced understanding of speed and texture.
Designing for Multiple Speeds | Figs. 07-08 | From the 45 mile-per-hour speed of highway traffic to the walking speed of the pedestrian, this intervention uses the concept of the zoetrope to address the vehicle and enhanced tactility to address the pedestrian.
Suspended from these cantilevered artifacts are the 235 rail ties that were removed from the railways that guide the Path throughout the state. These ties are burned by the process of crafting the aforementioned aluminum cast. In this way, the system is highly referential and indexed, utilizing the associative properties of memory to create associations and connections throughout the project.
While much of the project focuses on reconciliation with the past, the Infrastructure of Instigation addresses current unrest and potential futures. Designed as highly deployable data collectors, the Instigators remain dormant until they are triggered by high volumes of curated data from news and social media. Hashtags and keywords ranging from “Police Brutality” to “Traditional Workers Party” to “DACA” are loaded into the Instigators database. The sensitivity of the data threshold varies by city. Once activated, the Instigators become armatures of unrest that facilitate the demonstrations that activated them.
Looking specifically at Knoxville’s Market Square, the Instigators would be installed under the guise of an urban memorial project that is related to the rest of the proposed pathway through the state. In their dormant state, the instigators would be placed beneath concrete casts of the rail car’s interiors that exist along the rail path. In this way, the instigators are physically connected to the remainder of the trail while remaining hidden, potentially for years until their activation.

Perhaps the most important element of the Instigators is in their blind allegiance. The Instigators are designed as armatures for occupants of urban space, regardless of affiliation. They will activate just as easily for white supremacists as they will for other organizations, from the Equal Justice Initiative to other forms of political protest. This intervention is conceptually aligned with Musgrove and Asch’s *Chocolate City*, in which the destruction of portions of Washington D.C. following the death of Dr. Martin Luther King is described as both “catastrophic and cathartic.”

The primary purpose of the Instigators is to spatialize the unrest that is latent within the American cultural subconscious. This new kind of infrastructure manifests these concerns in public space with the intent of facilitating reparative conversations in the urban environment.
Chronology of Work | Fig. 12 | View of final presentation showcasing process work together with final design proposal. The juxtaposition of black and white is graphically maintained throughout the project.
Layering + Juxtaposition | Fig. 13 | Boards are suspended from gallery wall and projected over two feet into the exhibition space. This allows for perspectival parallax with the map behind, making the exhibit more interactive as the viewer is encouraged to navigate around the boards to gain articulated views of the map behind.
Suspension | Fig. 14 | View of crafted armatures from which the boards are suspended. Suspension also allows boards to swing freely as the visitor passes by, creating a more dynamic and “living” experience of the presentation.
Burning remained an important method of cartography throughout the project, culminating in the map shown above. Burned counties indicate the territories where the design interventions take place. The space between the boards and the wall is occupiable, allowing viewers to study the map in greater detail.
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IMAGE CITATIONS

Fig. 01: Map is the original creation of the author with data from ArcGIS
Fig. 02: Collage is the original creation of the author, with imagery from Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and open source images.
Fig. 03: Image is original creation of the author.
Fig. 04: Image is original creation of the author with photographic underlay by Sherman Cahal.
Fig. 05: Image is original creation of the author with underlay from Google Earth.
Fig. 06: Collage is original creation of the author.
Fig. 07: Image is original creation of the author.
Fig. 08: Image is original creation of the author.
Fig. 09: Image is original creation of the author with underlay from Google Earth.
Fig. 10: Image is original creation of the author.
Fig. 11: Image is original creation of the author with photographic sample from Zach Gross for *The New Yorker*.

Figs. 12-15: Images are original creations of the author.
REFLECTIONS + SYNTHESIS
PRODUCTS + REFLECTIONS

The goal of this project was to answer the essential question: As the scope of the human experience increases and forgetfulness becomes the normative condition, what is the architects role in curating America’s legacy of racial terrorism and violence?

After extensive research made it clear that America’s Oblivion was the normative condition and memory the exception, the need for memory-attuned infrastructure became clear. By developing tactics such as chronological juxtaposition, enhanced tactility, strategic erasure, and designing for speed to help mitigate the effects of oblivion, my hope is that this research will equip design professionals with the necessary strategies to combat this pervasive issue.

This research is by no means exhaustive. I hope to continue to explore these challenging questions in my future career, be it academic or professional. Some of the most useful tactics moving forward will certainly be strategic erasure and chronological juxtaposition. The issue of national reconciliation is only growing in significance as racial tensions reach levels akin to those of the early and mid 20th century.

Most importantly, whether in a gallery space or realized on-site, I hope that this research will stimulate reparative conversations about our country’s complex history.
APPENDIX A

TEXT CITATIONS


APPENDIX A

IMAGE CITATIONS BY SECTION

ARGUMENTATIVE ARMATURE

Fig. 01: Photo montage by author. Inspired by temporal visualization tactics from Richard McGuire's *Here*.

Figs. 02-05: Tarkovsky, Andrei. *Nostalghia*, stills from film, directed by Andrei Tarkovsky, 1983.

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Fig. 07: Luiz, Jose. *Severan Tondo*. July 24, 2017.

Fig. 08: Kindersley, Doring. *Birth of a Nation Theatrical Poster. Chronicle of the Cinema*, 1915.

Fig. 09: Open source image.

Figs. 10-11: Nolan, Christopher. *Inception*. stills from film, directed by Christopher Nolan, 2010. Fig. 10 modified by author

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Fig. 17: Otero-Pailos, Jorge. *The Ethics of Dust: Westminster Hall*. 2016.

Fig. 18: Photo by author.

Fig. 19: Kindersley, Doring. *Birth of a Nation Theatrical Poster. Chronicle of the Cinema*, 1915.

Fig. 20: Farnum, G.H., *The Lynching of Laura and L.D. Nelson*, Oklahoma Historical Society, 1911.

Fig. 21: Adams, Ansel, *Manzanar from Guard Tower*, 1943.

Fig. 22: Farnum, G.H., *The Lynching of Laura and L.D. Nelson*, Oklahoma Historical Society, 1911.

Fig. 23: 1941 Detroit race riots, open source image.

Fig. 24: Hudson, Bill for the *Associated Press*. May 1963.

Fig. 25-26: Chicago race riots of 1919, Open source image.

Fig. 27: Open source image.
IMAGE CITATIONS BY SECTION

ARGUMENTATIVE ARMATURE (continued)

Fig. 28: Map is original creation of the author, with information from the Tuskegee Institute Research Department and the Equal Justice Initiative

METHODOLOGY

Figs. 01-30: photos and artifacts by author.
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Figs. 32-40: photos and artifacts by author.

DESIGN PROPOSAL

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