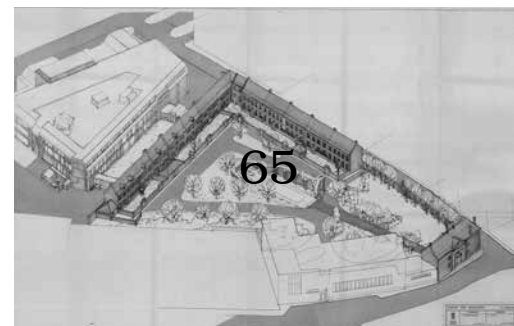


Trace

Notes on adaptive reuse

N°3 On Collectivity



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Milieux de mémoire

Recovering the collective memory of monastic heritage

N. Vande Keere



[1] Map of Antwerp by Virgilius Bononiensis in 1565; the location of the beguinage is indicated.

'Indeed, it is this very push and pull that produces lieux de mémoire – moments of history torn away from the movement of history, then returned; no longer quite life, not yet death, like shells on the shore when the sea of living memory has receded'.¹

Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire', 1989

'Memories are crafted by oblivion as the outlines of the shore are created by the sea'.²

Paul Augé, *Oblivion*, 2004

Loss of memory

The notion of heritage as a collective good brings to mind the concept of *lieu de mémoire*, introduced by Pierre Nora and translated as a 'site of memory'. This idea appears for the first time in his magnum opus *Les Lieux de Mémoire*, written and published in seven volumes between 1984 and 1992. Nora states:

a lieu de mémoire is any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community.³

He defines the concept as a 'history of the second degree' intending to identify and synthesise French history not chronologically but as a collection of (national) memories. The term became very popular in historiography and resonated at an international level. Since its introduction, various countries have constituted a similar 'canon' or collective memory to describe and delineate their national identity.

Nora also notes that 'we speak so much of memory because there is so little of it left'.⁴ Noteworthy and important here is the development by Nora of a theoretical framework based on a critical analysis of the meaning and role of memory and history in contemporary society. For Nora, memory can be characterised as a vivid but relative and emotional entity, un-self-conscious in nature, to be identified with a specific community and linked to tradition. This description appears in opposition to history, which has an analytical and critical character and can be considered an absolute and rational entity or science. In his article 'Between Memory and History:

Les Lieux de Mémoire', Nora describes the concept as a symptom of the loss of (the sense of) memory, proof of our alienation from the past. Once a memory is converted into a *lieu de mémoire*, it loses its dynamic properties and becomes static, to be (over-) compensated by the increasing recognition of (memorial) heritage as a collective good:

The moment of *lieux de mémoire* occurs at the same time that an immense and intimate fund of memory disappears, surviving only as a reconstituted object beneath the gaze of critical history. This period sees, on the one hand, the decisive deepening of historical study and, on the other hand, a heritage consolidated.⁵

In the same article, Nora defines the 'acceleration of history' in modern times as the progressive characterisation of the present as a historical past, framing it as the affirmation of the absence of living memory, transforming our era into one of commemoration or an organised form of memory. The abundant creation of archives or the automatic recording and storing of data in our digital age turns memory into a verifiable quantity. It bears witness to our obsession with accumulating information regardless of meaning. In 'Allégorie du patrimoine' (1992), Françoise Choay confirms this tendency in the field of heritage with the broadening of the definition of historical monuments since the 1960s to include industrial sites, larger urban and landscape areas, and vernacular architecture. As a consequence of this expansion, the role of historical heritage in defining a dynamic cultural identity is replaced by 'passive contemplation and the cult of generic identity'.⁶

¹ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations* 26, 1989: 12.

² Marc Augé, *Oblivion*, trans. Marjolijn De Jager (London and Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 20.

³ Pierre Nora, 'From *Lieux de mémoire* to Realms of Memory', in *Realms of Memory The Construction of the French Past*, ed. Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Krizman

(New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 17.

⁴ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*', 7.

⁵ Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', 11–12.

⁶ Françoise Choay, *The Invention of the Historic Monument*, trans. Lauren M. O'Connell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 165.

⁷ With characteristic ambivalence, Koolhaas continues to shift his discourse, ultimately defending a 'retreat into preservation' as part of contemporary architectural practice. For an interesting and critical reflection on this, we refer to the added supplement by Jorge Otero-Pailos in the same publication. Rem Koolhaas, *Preservation is overtaking us* (Columbia: GSAPP Transcripts 2014).

This development is continuing in recent times. The discourse was echoed in the exhibition 'Cronocaos' at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010 and in the publication 'Preservation is Overtaking Us' in 2014. In these, Rem Koolhaas denounces preservation as a modern invention and points out the inflation of the practice leading to the protection of an increasing number of historical buildings closer and closer in age to the present.⁷ In 2013, Rodney Harrison points to the overwhelming numbing effect of this practice, describing 'the consequence of this process of the heterogeneous piling up of disparate and conflicting pasts in the present as a "crisis" of accumulation of the past'.⁸

Research by design

In this paper, we investigate how adaptive reuse can 'revive' a historical site, how it can bring back memory in Nora's sense. We will examine the design proposals for the Beguinage of Antwerp (BE) and the Studios Monastery in Istanbul (TU),⁹ as mentioned in the visual essay 'Liberating images', also published in this volume.¹⁰ Beyond the characteristics described, we believe that the projects could contribute to a better understanding or a

sustainable definition of heritage as a collective good. Rather than just branding them *lieux de mémoire*, a title for which they undoubtedly qualify, we are interested in some of the questions accompanying the sites regarding collective memory and its meaning as a potential source for adaptive reuse. The two sites have (semi-)monastic origins and are situated at the edge of the old city centre. Both also developed a new identity, an afterlife or second life, by introducing a new layer reflecting on or reacting to their history. For this reason, both can be seen as equally detached from their origins, perceived as distant and dormant memories.¹¹

The Beguinage of Antwerp

The former Beguinage of Saint Catherine is situated in the north-east of the historical city centre [1]. It was built in the 16th century according to the typical square typology, then extended in the 17th century with additional houses accessed via an alley in the south. At its peak, the beguinage contained around 80 houses, including three 'convents' (collective housing units), with 280 beguines in 1700. The religious community of women was popular – most of them, in addition to making



[2] Postcard with a picturesque view of the entrance of the Beguinage of Antwerp after the first, romantic restoration; the ornamentation of the front and the tower on the left were removed in another restoration phase in the 1970s

⁸ Rodney Harrison, 'Forgetting to remember, remembering to forget: Late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the "crisis" of accumulation of the past', *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2012.678371>:580. See also Rodney Harrison, *Heritage Critical Approaches* (London: Routledge, 2012). Harrison and Nora both refer to the modern obsession with memo-

ry, translated into an interest in personal history (e.g. family genealogy) or the collection of intimate, everyday objects.

⁹ For the relevance and definition of research by design, we refer to the EAAE Charter on Architectural Research: 'Any kind of inquiry in which design is the substantial constituent of the research process is referred to as research by design. In research by design, the architectural design process

forms the pathway through which new insights, knowledge, practices or products come into being. It generates critical inquiry through design work'. 'EAAE Charter on Architectural Research', European Association for Architectural Education, 2012, accessed August 9, 2020, <http://www.eaae.be/about/statutes-and-policy/eaae-charter-architectural-research/>.



[3] Longitudinal section of the children's rehabilitation centre by Matthew Moskal; left: the garden of the Capuchin monastery, right: transparency between the different courtyards.

handicrafts, actively cared for the city's poor and sick.¹² After the French invasion in 1794, the beguines were expelled, and the houses were used for lodging by the army. Under the Antwerp city council, only the larger part south of the church, around the front court and alley, remained. The beguines revived in the 19th century until 1925, when a considerably smaller group retreated to the Old Convent and rented out the private houses, initially to women in need and later to elderly priests and couples. The order in Antwerp and Belgium and the Netherlands as a whole gradually disappeared after WWII.

Of special interest here is the afterlife of the Beguinage of Antwerp. Countering modernisation, there was growing attention to the heritage sites of 'Old Antwerp' at the turn of the 19th century, with both tendencies being represented in the popular world exposition of 1894. The increasing value attributed to the tradition of the beguinages in Flanders triggered different preservation campaigns, often going beyond mere restoration, to freely interpret (read romanticise) the beguine culture, situating its origin in the Middle Ages. The Saint Catherine Beguinage is a clear example of this distortion of memory. It underwent three restoration phases, representing radically different concepts. Between 1905 and 1906, in the wake of the world expo, the front courts and volumes around the central garden were upgraded in the historicising style of the Gothic Revival, which was later criticised as *béguinage d'opéra comique* [2]. Between 1974 and 1977, the western part of this was returned to an idealised original state, in reality amounting to demolition and the replacement of authentic parts while transforming the independent houses into apartments. The last phase was more moderate with a combination of both approaches on the south side of the beguinage after the protection of the site between 1982 and 1984.¹³

After the disappearance of the order, most beguinages were predisposed to become quiet collective housing neighbourhoods in the city (inspiring contemporary architectural housing projects up until the present). In the design assignment, the students were to study the typology and to rethink this collectivity. They considered an adaptive reuse of the beguinage by re-evaluating its current use as housing and introducing additional functions that could activate intangible heritage values or create a different relationship with the urban context. The assignment included a reflection on the collective memory of the site, trying to find an answer to the question 'What does the (current) beguinage in Antwerp represent as a heritage site?' The students were encouraged to re-activate its memory in Nora's sense, beyond the confusing restoration phases. The two design proposals presented here take the heavily transfigured front courtyards and pavilions as the starting point for a new approach, combining it with a programme that directly or indirectly relates to beguine culture. They rely on a contemporary interpretation of both the older typology and functions.¹⁴

The project of Matthew Moskal redefines the private outdoor spaces. Inspired by the former presence of an infirmary, it introduces a psychiatric rehabilitation centre for children in the former convent and adjacent dwellings. By creating an opening to the neighbouring garden of the Capuchin monastery, the site receives a second access point from the busy *Italiëlei* (part of the inner ring road around Antwerp). The proposal diversifies the front courts as interfaces between the main buildings and the larger gardens.¹⁵ The existing front doors open up to the courts with a varying degree of privacy depending on the length of the treatment. A passage between them is articulated with subtle transparency. The project gives a new meaning to the outdoor spaces of the

¹⁰ Both this article and the visual essay develop a discourse starting from the same projects. As such they are able to inform each other but can also be read independently.

¹¹ Harrison refers to the protected status of heritage 'which gives dying objects, traditions, places and ways of life a "second life"', exhibiting the remains as 'fragments and relics of a threatened past or present'.

Harrison, 'Forgetting to remember', 588, 582.

¹² For a more in-depth description of the semi-monastic Beguine culture we refer to the article 'Memory as a design studio - The transformation of the Hasselt Beguinage into a Faculty of Architecture' by Koenraad Van Cleempoel in this *cahier*.

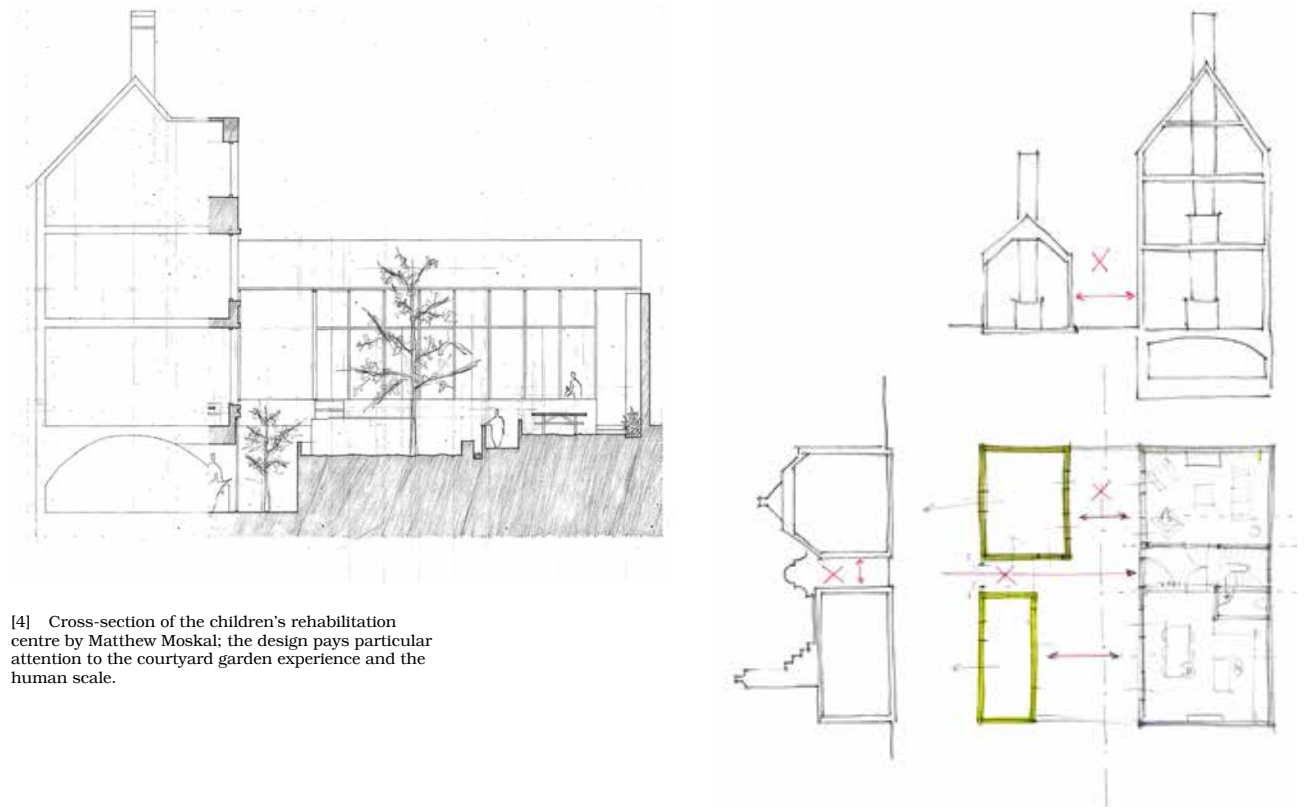
¹³ ARAT architecten, *Beheersplan Begijnhof Antwerpen* (2018), 23, 41. 'Begijnhof

bouwkundig geheel', 2018, <https://inventaris.onroerendergoed.be/erfgoedobjecten/300119>.

¹⁴ The current plans are to transform the structure into affordable and quality houses for rent. See 'Een nieuwe toekomst voor het Begijnhof', 2020, <https://www.agvespa.be/nieuws/een-nieuwe-toekomst-voor-het-begijnhof>.

beguinage. It employs its (semi-)monastic memory to reintroduce a healing environment in an urban context [3, 4].

The project of Adèle Hogge gives a new role to the courtyard pavilions. It detaches them from the main dwellings and redefines their relationship with the public space. In this way, the pavilions can make passers-by aware of the various activities derived from beguine culture and encourage them to enter the courtyards. The project manages to transform the relatively closed part of the beguinage into an inviting urban passage while at the same time turning (a part of) the site into an active outdoor museum. By bending the layered typology to its will, it succeeds in breaking up history to reveal what beguine culture might have looked like today [5].



[4] Cross-section of the children's rehabilitation centre by Matthew Moskal; the design pays particular attention to the courtyard garden experience and the human scale.

The Stoudios Monastery in Istanbul

The ruins of the Greek Orthodox monastery dedicated to Saint John the Baptist are situated in the current Yedikule district, a neighbourhood in the south-west of the historical city centre of Istanbul (then Constantinople), within the Theodosian walls and close to the Golden Gate [6]. It was founded in the 5th century and is the oldest surviving Byzantine church structure in the city. The monastery became famous at the end of the 8th century under Abbot Theodore the Studite as a place of study and specialised in manuscript illumination. The abbot was known for his independent point of view, often in opposition to the emperor and patriarch, and for his rejection of Byzantine Iconoclasm (the banning of religious images and their veneration). The

[5] Floorplan and sections of one dwelling by Adèle Hogge; the disconnection of the courtyard pavilions from the main volume allows for additional programme and a stronger relationship with the public space.

¹⁵ Another inspiration for the project was the monastic garden as a place for retreat. The typology of the enclosed garden or *hortus conclusus* is also addressed in Nikolaas Vande Keere and Bie Plevoets, 'The interiority of the landscape - The hortus conclusus as a leitmotiv for adaptive reuse', *TRACE Notes on Adaptive Reuse 1*, 2018: 23-32. <https://sites.google.com/uhasselt.be/trace/cahier/issues>.



[6] Map of Constantinople by Cristoforo Buondelmonti in 1422, predating the fall of the Byzantine Empire; the location of the Stoudios Monastery is indicated.

church and monastery underwent many transformations throughout history. It was destroyed during the crusade of 1204 and restored in 1290. The cloister is said to have housed up to 700 monks and was initially surrounded by vineyards and orchards, covering a large surface of the peninsula.

It was destroyed again in 1453 with the fall of the Byzantine Empire, and at the end of the 15th century, the church building began its second life as the Imrahor Ilyas Bey Mosque under Ottoman rule. The church was appropriated, and its sacred interior reorientated under an oblique angle, as is still visible in today's remnants. Hollis's description of the transformation of the Hagia Sophia in 1590 was most likely also applicable to the monastery and church [7]:

¹⁶ Edward Hollis, *The Secret Lives of Buildings* (London: Portobello Books, 2009), 84.

¹⁷ For the characterisation of the monastery as a *lieu de mémoire* or a *palimpsest* containing the history of Istanbul, we refer to 'The Stoudios Monastery as a Lieu de Mémoire: Preserving History and Making It', *Humanities* 54: The Urban Imagination, 2016. <http://hum54-15.omeka.fas.harvard.edu/exhibits/show/the-stoudios-monastery-as-a-li>.

The *mihrab* of Ayasofya sat some ten degrees off the centre line of the apse of Hagia Sophia ... the carpets were oriented towards the *mihrab* of Ayasofya, so that they lay diagonally across the floor of Hagia Sophia; and when the mosque was filled with the rows of the faithful they formed another carpet – as magnificently embroidered, to be sure, as the first – that extended outwards from the *mihrab*, and thus from Mecca itself.¹⁶

The Yedikule district was restructured after a fire in 1782. The former church or mosque fell into ruin after its roof collapsed in the 1894 earthquake and has not been restored. Industrialisation and urbanisation continued to transform the ancient character of the district. In 1946, the monastery was declared a museum in secular Turkey, while large parts of it remained neglected and inaccessible. In 1995, the historical peninsula was labelled a conservation zone. After more than a century, the abandoned site was mentioned again in 2013, when the Turkish city government planned to turn it back into a mosque, reigniting the old dispute over its memory with the small Greek minority in the multi-ethnic neighbourhood. Again, the fate of the church is similar to that of the Hagia Sophia, having been transformed into a museum for a long time and now being converted back into a mosque. From the start, the design and, more specifically, the new programme was framed by a symbolic discussion on ownership of the past.



[7] Picture by Nicholas V. Artamonoff in 1937: a view from the minaret with an oblique wall and platform in the former apse revealing the second life of the Stoudios Monastery church as a mosque.

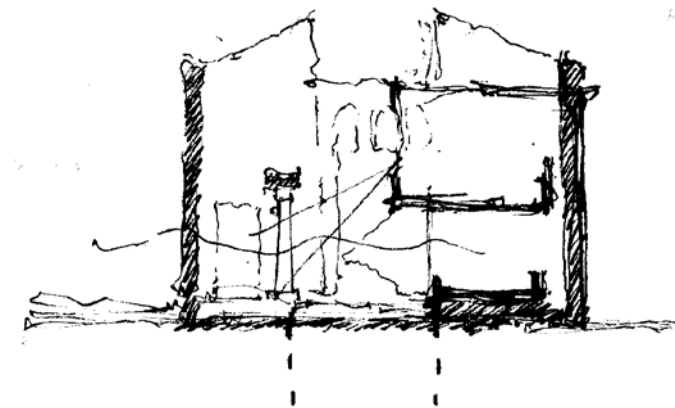
the design embraces the characteristic historical complexity. It does not choose sides but rather reveals how different layers are able to superpose or coexist [8].

Remember and forget

As if the loss of memory seemed to befall the term *lieu de mémoire* itself, its growing use ironically has led to a reduction in meaning and its generic (ab-) use over time. Nora's 'negative' discourse is in stark contrast to the recurrent and institutionalised application of the term today, promoting it positively and publicly as sites to visit, implying the act of remembrance is the fulfilment of a civic duty. Being primarily understood today in a topological sense, a sense of 'place-making', the concept too often seems to be reduced to its passive properties of representation and symbolism. Nora himself calls it self-referential in nature. Typical for the original *zeitgeist*, it can be labelled 'postmodern'. As such, it can perhaps be compared to the tourist 'souvenir' or postcard – a simplified reminder of a place and time.

The site of the ruins can be considered as contested heritage, a *lieu de mémoire* for Turkish identity that incorporates the nation's inherent struggle with its religious history and prompts the question 'To whom does the heritage site of the Stoudios Monastery belong?'¹⁷

Today, the site is still a neglected and green 'island' in a residential environment, with boundaries that are the result of urban transformations and the ruined reminders of the past. Over the years, demographic changes in the neighbourhood resulted in the social dominance of the Turkish Muslim community. The project of Merve Yildirim uses the tension between the ruined historic interiors – now exteriors – and the new spaces to reflect on the memory of the site. The position of the volumes 'in-between' the different historic transformations emphasises its layered quality. Although the new programme to build a library refers to the Byzantine monastic era, it also aligns itself with some Ottoman interventions (e.g. the entrance spaces and the reading space parallel to the *mihrab*). Rather than simplifying or restoring the site to its original state,



[8] Sketch with a cross-section of the intervention in the ruined church by Merve Yildirim. The new library spaces on the right offer a view of the ruins with the conserved floor pattern in the nave and the row of columns on the left.

In the article ‘The city is not a post-card’, Pérez-Gómez rejects the representation of the environment as an objectified image and its reduction to its formal properties. Similarly, a historical event cannot simply be symbolised by a place. Pérez-Gómez considers context and history not static but changing properties, in need of architectural interpretation to contribute to ‘the recovery of place as a critical project’. He calls for a broad cultural understanding and a personal approach by the architect, introducing the term ‘narrative’ to articulate the project.¹⁸

The heritage site of the Beguinage of Antwerp has been the subject of depiction on postcards (as have the romantic makeovers of all beguinages in Belgium). Although no postcards of the Stoudios Monastery seem to exist today, the many depictions in the past reveal a similar potential. Both are examples of how history can put an end to living collective memory, heritage sites that run the risk of becoming treated as endangered species, frozen and ossified, ultimately to be looked at only by tourists. Contrary to this and in agreement with Harrison, we argue for heritage as a selective and active process of producing collective memory:

in the same way in which some memories are actively cultivated by the preservation of traces of the past in the present, other traces persist and are ignored. Such traces might later re-emerge as significant sources for the creation of future collective memories ... This draws us away from the idea that memory is passive or implied in the conservation of traces ... to see memory as something that we must actively and mindfully produce in conversation with the traces of the past and their spectres. Instead, it means thinking actively about heritage and its role in contemporary society, and foregrounding the ways in which heritage is constantly produced and reproduced in the present. It is only through an active engagement with the present that we can produce the collective memories that will bind us to the future.¹⁹

The design proposals mentioned above exemplify the potential role of adaptive reuse in this context. They (re-)interpret memory as an active property and translate it into a new narrative, once again trying to make sense of it all. They have the potential to go beyond the sign language of the *lieu de mémoire* or the outdated model of heritage representing a national ‘canon’ and bring back what Nora himself called the *milieu de mémoire*, a proper environment of memory. In this *milieu*, memory is mediating, selecting, or discarding some traces or layers in favour of others.

In response to the ‘crisis’ of the accumulation of the past, Harrison pleads for a revaluation of ‘heritagisation’ processes and suggests increasing the practice of de-listing in the context of heritage management. He conceptually points to the process of forgetting as an integral part of remembering, which is central to countering the modern inability to form collective memories. These notions very much resonate with philosopher Jef Malpas, who has developed and deepened similar thoughts on the role of memory in relationship to place and architecture.²⁰ To re-inscribe heritage into the cycle of life, we consider the selective process to be equally essential for architects in the context of adaptive reuse. They are to engage with the tangible and intangible remains of a site and invest it with personal commitment.²¹ Unlike historians, architects cannot simply stand at a distance, understanding history not as a given but trying to reconstitute it as a *milieu de mémoire*. As such, the design proposals are ambiguous and do not provide straight answers to the questions regarding what a heritage site represents or to whom it belongs. Rather, one could say they reformulate the questions, engage with them, or raise awareness of the contentious aspects inherent to heritage as the representation of a collective identity. Architects ultimately try to re-activate or recover, if not the collective memory of the past, at least some of its traces for the future:

Remembering or forgetting is doing gardener’s work, selecting, pruning. Memories are like plants: there are those that need to be quickly eliminated in order to help the others burgeon, transform, flower.²²

to its original state, the designers chose to maintain the historical traces of decay as a result from both its monastic function and its second life as army barracks. (The project opened to the public in August 2019.) See Christoph Grafe et al., *The Predikheren Mechelen – Transformation of a Monastery Ruin into a City Library*, ed. Mechtild Stuhlmacher and Joeri De Bruyn (Mechelen: Public Space, 2019).

²² Augé, *Oblivion*, 17.

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¹⁸ Alberto Pérez-Gómez, ‘The City is not a Post-Card: The Problem of Genius Loci’, *Architektur* 4, 2007.

¹⁹ Harrison, ‘Forgetting to remember, remembering to forget: late modern heritage practices, sustainability and the ‘crisis’ of accumulation of the past’, 591–592.

²⁰ E.g. the intrinsic sense of loss accompanying memory, the potential role of memory close to Nora’s *milieu de mémoire*, and the inevitable link between remembering and forgetting. Jef Malpas, ‘Building Memory’,

Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts 13, 2012. See also Bie Plevoets and Koenraad Van Cleempoel. ‘Chapter 5: Concluding reflections’, in *Adaptive Reuse of the Built Heritage: Concepts and Cases of an Emerging Discipline* (London: Routledge, 2019).

²¹ A good example of a realised architectural project in the context of this article is the transformation of the Dominican Monastery ruin in Mechelen (BE) into a public library. Rather than restoring the building

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