

Remnants of Lives Lived Within an Ancient City:

A Contemporary Call for Reflection

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Introduction

This work on constructed city remnants builds on the author's previous architectural and interdisciplinary fieldwork projects¹ that focus on *streetspace* as the background or foreground for in depth cultural and socio-spatial investigations that seek to expose new realizations about the existing urban realm. The subject of this new and hopefully revealing urban research—cum reflective architectural/art/environmental story—uses different approaches to view and interpret often ignored, or underacknowledged urban sites that overtly face city streets. The focus is on an unusual residential habitat that has become more common and visible. These structures are several stories high, and are experienced in a vertical format as mostly flat cross-sections of apartment remnants. The marked and textured rooms, floors and circulation exhibit abstracted parts of “private lives lived,” to the public. Their striking condition called out for a new typological term: the “wall-place.”²

Walking through many parts of Istanbul, it could be said that the city of Istanbul is comprised of contradictions seen and felt inside its built environment, and intensified by its large and diverse population. Architecturally, the composition of the city allows the extremely new to clash with the ancient, as still utilized or re-adapted historic structures of all kinds are often set next to new modern edifices. The city's different eras of building create a form of ever-presence, dependent on a character of overlap and collision, also evoking a disorganized or asynchronous sense of time (Celik, 1986; Gul, 2009). Because Istanbul's urban culture appears to easily accept, embrace and possibly rely upon the continuously aging and transforming built environment, the wall-place acting as a leftover, a ruin or remnant may seem prominent to some like the author, but they also blend into Istanbul's urban surround instead of disrupting it as ugly or odd. Indeed, their acceptance also allows them to be passed by and overlooked. And, though these walls can be found in other large city locales³, Istanbul's examples are unusual—they contain varied and suggestive, layered contexts worth considering and documenting from several vantage points.

¹ The author has long conducted urban (and rural) fieldwork projects mostly in Turkey or New York City.

² The “wall-place” as a term, is coined by the author.

³ The choice to stay with Istanbul examples for this essay, is purposeful. Though similar types of walls have recently been noticed in New York City, it appears that none of the USA examples exhibit the same level of literal remnant materials, coloration, texture, or condition of what could be called urban collage, that the Istanbul examples contain. The walls in other cities will emerge in future comparative research, to explore different relationships to a particular city—such as, how these places are cared for, ignored, erased, or even celebrated—and with a focus on the effect of social, cultural and economic issues.

As an extension of ACSF's current symposium provocation regarding "Resonance of the Past, Spirit of the Future: exploring transcendent unity in a world of multiplicity," the wall-place in Istanbul can be understood as a "memorial to the mundane" inside this mega city. This concept is explored inside this essay paper as the author contemplates the meaning or symbolism of these wall-places, asking why they exist, and what calling them a kind of everyday memorial might stand for.



Figure 1: Plate of 12 varied wall-places. (copyright belongs to Alison B. Snyder)

Some Methods, Questions and Sources

In early 2023, the author started to become aware of several large walls exposing past lives. These stark cross-sections with attached pieces of habitation kept coming into view in different neighborhoods. While they appeared to exhibit some shared atmospheres and characteristics, they also embodied unique shapes and forms, highly-textured areas, rooms, stairs, sometimes with tile, wallpaper and other material features, and colors. Surprisingly expressive layers of house-like shapes, grids of floors and other divisions produce overlapping collaged conditions. These remnants of previously lived spaces seemed curious, special and indicative of a purposeful field research with undefined interpretation.



Figure 2: Detailed of textured masonry and ceramic wall remnants. (copyright belongs to Alison B. Snyder)

As this work asks for reflection on the mundane, meaningful questioning about normal day-to-day living in the city of Istanbul, and what can be noticed as transformative seemed appropriate. Relevant questions became: Why are the remnant walls potentially important (relaying symptoms of moral, sociological, psychological, and economic issues)? Are the wall-places merely unimportant residential ruins in an ancient city, and representing ugly eyesores of degradation; and, blurring notions of permanence and temporality in the city? Were they merely windows into embarrassing personal scenes; Do they convey quiet messages about memories and loss, and sadness evoking rampant melancholia?⁴; Could the wall-place be described as having “remnant beauty,” putting forth a poetics of human traces through their scale and materiality?

These ponderous themes must also show an awareness of Istanbul’s complex spirit that can be described as Turkish which includes an intersection of Eastern and Western tendencies and collisions. Thus, some of the interpretations put forth for in this symposium paper will also ponder if these wall-places might shed light on public and private behaviors ironically related to covering windows and indeed bodies, to protect as well as block an outsider’s view to the interior. Short narratives interweave these ideas with the author’s decision to capture (largely through photography, with some digital overlays) the casual experience of passing the wall-place from the street (as a glancing passerby), or to convey the wonderment about how this wall-place may represent a “memorial to the mundane,” with its internalized spaces and marks turned external for all the public to see.

⁴ Noted author Orhan Pamuk writes about the society’s permeating Turkish concept of *hüzün*, explaining it as a place of loss and grief in life, like a spiritual anguish (2005, 90). Having spent a fair amount of time in Turkey and Istanbul, the author attests to understanding and feeling this pressure within the people, and at times as a personal intense feeling of listless searching.



Figure 3: Street view of wall-place (contains figure 2). (copyright belongs to Alison B. Snyder)

Thematically similar, but contextually different, professor of psychology, Julian Manley, researched a 2015 U.K. exhibition showing houses in stages of demolition. Visitors commented that the views were “painfully intimate” (2020, 8). Also pertinent to many of these subjects, author and philosopher, Susan Sontag (1977) explored many perspectives about the role of photographers, street photography, and its history. She reported photographer Bernice Abbot did not memorialize parts of the city, but rather presented conditions experienced as “used up, swept away, thrown out, traded in...” (62); and, Sontag follows urban critic Walter Benjamin’s pronouncing that Eugene Atget’s photos of empty Parisienne streets had “hidden political significance” (162) as they “furnish evidence” (5). Visual artist [Metehan Özcan](#) wrote about photographing abandoned spaces to suggest subjective versus universal experiences (2012). Baudrillard (1999) furthers the aesthetic questions of documenting and transforming interpretation. He wrote: “The miracle of photography, of its so-called objective image, is that it reveals a radically non-objective world. It is a paradox that the lack of objectivity of the world is disclosed by the photographic lens (objectif)...Through its unrealistic play of visual techniques, its slicing of reality, its immobility, its silence, and its phenomenological reduction of movements, photography affirms itself as both the purest and the most artificial exposition of the image.” The author uses photography as a means to create the group of wall-place memorials, and to portray a kind of urban empathy.

Are there Conclusions?

This presentation is meant to contemplate the singular and the collection of wall-places as they act as a “memorial to the mundane.” Can we answer if they expose Istanbul’s urban issues or everybody’s lives, in general? Do they symbolize life discarded, or even abandonment or by choice, or just openly hidden stories? Merleau-Ponty’s (1999) concept of the world says *interiority* represents the psyche, heart, feeling and sensing; yet, importantly the simultaneity of *exteriority* as defined by the material world, expresses the other side of the corporeal condition of living. In Turkey, for example and in particular in Istanbul today, the expression of exposing the past as a ruin or remnant resonates within a city that has side-by-side centuries of history able to be felt and touched. As memorials, the wall-places act like giant 3D billboards, producing symbolic messages about life turned towards the exterior for public gazing. Thus, the wall-place becomes a form of expressing the trials of an always transforming contemporary [Turkish] condition that usually relies on encasing space, dressing it and then only exposing life through window curtains.

Using several forms of recording, from text/prose to stark photography (color and black and white), to experimental digital overlays⁵ and other handmade interpretations, several types of narrative views—artistic and realistic are paired for audience interpretation. Put another way, these interior-exterior vertical architectures with their stunning visual and textural materiality produce a means to have people/viewers contemplate the power of the remnant, as a contemporary cultural memorial to everyday change—at personal or city scale. Thus, “contemporary call for reflection on lives lived within an ancient city” calls upon us as outsiders and insiders wherever we reside, to not overlook the remnant and its possible impact in the moment. These past lives and flattened habitats now externalized ask for a careful gazing of the private. Their significance is still emerging.

⁵ Important thanks go to Paul Lagasse, a May 2024 Pratt graduate MFA student in interior design who assisted with digital graphics, and acted as a sounding board for this early wall-place research.



Figure 4: Draft of digital overlay with spatial room projections and screens that emulate curtains or reflections blocking street view to interior. (copyright belongs to Alison B. Snyder)

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