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BODILY ARCHIVES: EXPLORING MEMORIES OF EXPERIENCE IN WALMER YARD THROUGH PORTRAITS OF THE BODY IN SPACE

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I explore the process of returning to Walmer Yard and capturing photographs of myself in key spaces which held memories for me particular to my role as Keeper. As Keeper of Walmer Yard, the four houses were my collection and it was my responsibility to care for them, whether this be by cleaning and maintaining them, or ensuring their legacy through public programming, tours, and events. However at times this role took a particular toll on my body and mind and many of my memories of the space are tied up in difficult moments.

These moments and memories are ephemeral. They do not leave visible traces and they resist permanence. By re-placing my body in these spaces I was re-enacting or re-visiting specific moments in time within my own experiences of Walmer Yard. My body creates the archive and acts as a medium for memory. The photographs serve as a talisman for my memories of the place.

In recent decades, following on from what is commonly known as the ‘archival turn’, different theoretical and methodological reflections have been made about archives, their origins, configurations, and uses. An archive is traditionally described as a place or collection containing documents, records, or other historical materials. The archive can be restrictive, especially in who creates an archive, how they are created, stored and held, and who has access to them. But the idea of the archive is changing. The archive can also be seen as not only a site of knowledge storage or retrieval but as a place of knowledge production. Here, I aim to explore how I am attempting to archive my own experience of Walmer Yard to position the work and archive as a way to translate the experience of a place.

In this paper I will explore the process of returning to Walmer Yard and capturing photographs of myself in key spaces which held memories for me particular to my role as Keeper.¹ These photos sit aside a series of casts and poems which were created whilst living in Walmer Yard.² The casts and poems present moments of care while the photographs involve a recollection and replication of this care. As Keeper of Walmer Yard, the four houses were my collection and it was my responsibility to care for them; whether this be by cleaning and maintaining them or through ensuring their legacy through public programming, tours, and events. As I mention in ‘Casting to Care’, published in the Live Writing section of this issue, I performed multiple roles while Keeper. At times these multiple changing roles took a particular toll on my body and mind and many of my memories of the space are tied up in difficult moments.

These moments and memories are ephemeral. They do not leave visible traces and they resist permanence. They are not part of the architect’s narrative of the

building. These ephemeral moments are historically difficult to store in a traditional archive based on written or drawn materials or conventional modes of representation. The idea of the body as an archive, which is what I am exploring here in this paper, challenges this idea of ephemerality. Rob Baum describes the body as a site of storage — a container for emotion, sensation, memory, and trauma.³ As he writes: ‘The concept of an archive is thereby not confined to an architectural edifice, institutional machine, or artistic medium but is a humanly embodied locus for memory. In this formulation the body is the archive’.⁴ I propose that the body has the capacity to store and to transmit knowledge, allowing an experience to survive through time.

Through allowing my body to revisit these memories, I am practicing embodiment and the idea of embodied actualisation as discussed by Andre Lepecki.⁵ I will discuss this alongside ideas of active memory and the theories of archiving explored by Michel Foucault,⁶ Hal Foster,⁷ and Jacques Derrida.⁸ By *re-placing* my body in these spaces, I was *re-enacting* or *re-visiting* specific moments in time within my own experiences of Walmer Yard. My body creates the archive and acts as a medium for memory. The photographs serve as a talisman for my memories of the place.

I’ll first begin with my photographs and some accompanying words which begin to evoke memories of my time within the spaces, the roles I undertook, and the particular feelings and emotions that emerged.

1 Walmer Yard is a housing scheme in West London designed by the acclaimed architect Peter Salter with long-time collaborator Fenella Collingridge and commissioned by the developer Crispin Kelly. In 2018 upon its completion, it became the home of the Baylight Foundation — a charity which aimed to increase the public understanding of what architecture can do based on the experience of Walmer Yard. In the same year as the building completed, I was appointed Keeper to oversee this new foundation. For more information, see: www.walmeryard.co.uk.

2 These can be found in ‘Casting to Care: The Walls of Walmer Yard’ which is included in the Live Writing section of this journal.

3 Rob Baum, ‘The Body as Archive: The Shoah and the Story (Not) Told’, *Poetics Today*, 38.4 (2017), pp. 667–93.

4 Baum, ‘The Body as Archive’, p. 669.

5 Andre Lepecki, ‘The Body as Archive: Will to Re-Enact and the Afterlives of Dances’, *Dance Research Journal*, 42.2 (2012), pp. 28–41.

6 Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 2nd edn (Routledge, 2002).

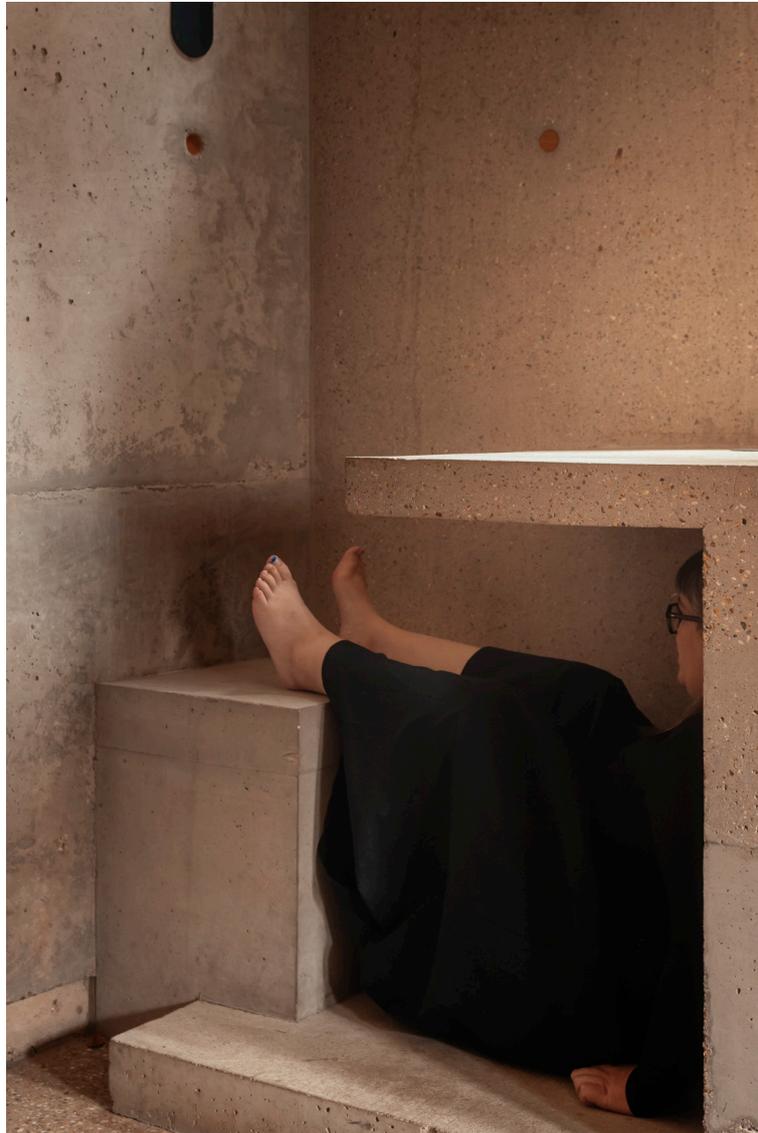
7 Hal Foster, ‘An Archival Impulse’, *October*, 110 (2004), pp. 3–22.



In this small space, I crawled amongst the dust and cobwebs. Here I have no phone signal. It is just me and the buzz of the fire alarm, the occasional beep of some unidentified M&E system, the grunting of the boiler echoing within the concrete cave. I feel claustrophobic in this space. I am deep within the belly of the house. Here, I unplug and replug the myriads of cables, hoping to restore connectivity.



The Fortuny fabric for the curtain had arrived from Venice. I think of the water and canals so synonymous with that city as I feel the damp fabric now. It is the day after the flood and after the water has been pumped out, I'm left with the aftermath. There is a tideline along the curtain, the bottom drips brown, stinking water onto the damp, stained concrete floor. The wicker walls are also marked with a tide line of brown dust and debris. I survey the scene in the dark, the lights no longer work, the cables in the floor were submerged by the flood waters. It's eerie. Somehow all the noises, the creaks, the groans of the house feel amplified as if I'm down in the belly of a ship.



On this concrete seat I perch waiting, drinking my coffee and finishing my cereal as I anticipate the first tour of the day. I can see the front gate from here, but it's hard to see me. The neighbours wave as they bundle the kids down the stairs and out of the gate to nursery. They know my morning hiding spot.



The contractors are here again. They are the only people I have seen for weeks. We are in the depths of the pandemic and almost all socialising, programming, and work is stopped. But our builders have made the decision that they can come and work — after all I'm the only person here in these houses. After so much time alone, I feel that they are everywhere. They interrupt my feeling of privacy appearing without warning in any room. Their banging, singing, shouting leaches into my thoughts as I attempt to write. I hide up here. I sit within this nook, a nothing space between the living room fireplace and the stairs to the rooftop. Here, it is quiet and I am hidden. The smell of cedar ruminates from inside the nook calming my mind and offering a different sense of the space.

REMAKING THE ARCHITECTURAL ARCHIVE

Mostly how we experience space in architecture is discussed from a visual perspective; in particular, through the gaze of the architect.⁹ This preoccupation with the visual and the materiality of the building is what absorbs me, and is what I am trying to contradict, in my alternative interpretations of Walmer Yard. At the same time, I also aim to address the messiness of the body and its interactions with the architecture. In this paper I've chosen not to show you Walmer Yard as presented in architectural magazines or as published in books or online. You see the houses as I chose to see them, through the photographs I have staged and produced.

My photographs and autoethnographical writings provide alternative close readings of the building. These move away from traditional architectural criticism which so often neglects bodily experience in favour of the glossy showy celebrity of the architect and emphasis on the visual and the materiality of the work of architecture.

My voice is generally not part of the recognised archives of Walmer Yard. These include: the drawings by Peter Salter of the houses, created both during its design and construction; the photographs by Helene Binet; and the essays produced for a book on the houses. You might also find the lectures that Peter Salter, Fenella Collingridge, and Crispin Kelly gave on Walmer Yard during the decade of its formation. But the voice of the person that took on the houses after its completion, that has cared for them, cleaned them, mopped them out while they flooded, guided scores of architects around them, locked them up at the end of each day, is the unheard and unrecognised voice of the houses. I am the person who has experienced them the most, who has slept in every bedroom, been to the toilet in every

bathroom, cooked in every kitchen. In architecture and traditional archives, this is not seen as valid, but why? Who gets to tell the story of these houses?

It is important to find new ways of theorising the encounter between bodies, materials, and architecture to account for the subjectivities of minorities which are so often forgotten in architectural history and criticism. My role as curator, keeper, carer, researcher, and resident are foregrounded here and thus become important in the telling of the story of Walmer Yard.

The work that I have created — in these photographs and the words that accompany them — aims to explore what an alternative archive might be or might contain. It extends beyond the traditional form of architectural creation to one that attempts to relate itself to the body and aims to offer a form of resistance.

MY BODY WITHIN THE ARCHIVE

What is particularly important in these photographs is the idea of the body in the architecture — the space my body takes up but also the feelings and sensations offered through the building's particular materiality. I'm also interested in the traces the building has left on me and those which I have left on it.

Juliette Singh writes that 'in the end, we are not bounded, contained subjects, but ones filled up with foreign feelings and vibes that linger and circulate in space, that enter us as we move through our lives'.¹⁰ She adds:

Something haunting about the fact that the non-singularity of the body, its vital entanglements with other kinds of bodies, was once so obvious across cultures, geographies, and histories that it didn't need to be argued. Something changed, something

8 Jacques Derrida, 'Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression', trans. by Eric Prenowitz, *Diacritics*, 25.2 (1995), pp. 9–63.

9 Judy Attfield, *Wild Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life* (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2000).

10 Julietta Singh, 'The Body Archive', in *No Archive Will Restore You* (Punctum Books, 2018), pp. 29–56.

was changed. A monumental worldview swept in and tried — with brute force, with discipline, with pedagogy — to make us each one-self.¹¹

Through this idea of an archive of my experience of Walmer Yard, I am placing the body within spaces I have already encountered at different moments during my time as Keeper. These moments are staged. My body is transient: I have moved on from my job there; my body moves within the spaces, interacts in different ways; but there is a juxtaposition between this and the idea of the permanence of an archive. As discussed by Laura Griffiths, this ‘presents a tension between immaterial lived phenomena and the fixed, explicit records’.¹² The photographs and the archive that they form part of becomes a record of where my body has been and the encounter it has had with the building.

BODILY MEMORIES WITHIN THE ARCHIVE

The idea of using these photographs of my body in the space to create an archive of my own experiences of Walmer Yard also attempts to tackle the idea of memory in how we encounter architecture. Griffiths has also highlighted the parallels between the body and the archive which bring to light the temporality of memory and the fragility of its container.¹³

As Baum suggests, ‘memory requires a return to the scene, moment, and place, at least in the body.’¹⁴ When capturing these photographs, I was returning to a particular moment and time at Walmer Yard. The photographs then acted as a talisman as I used them to help to recall ideas and diary moments to recreate texts. Archivist Laura Millar interprets this relationship through the notion of archival materials as ‘touchstones’ to memory.¹⁵ These photographs act as my touchstone to the embedded memories of Walmer Yard.

CONCLUSIONS

Through this work I am aiming to connect the entanglement of architectural knowledge with embodied encounter and lived experience in a different form of architectural archive.

I am also interested in the idea of permanence and how the traces we leave on a building and that a building leaves upon us can create a very particular experience. Often our encounters, moments, and memories are ephemeral — they do not leave visible traces and they resist the idea of permanence. My archive is also temporal — it is something which is growing and changing over time, differing from a more traditional archive. It is melancholic, incomplete, and takes into account the unruliness of the body and also of memory. But through exploring this work using ideas of encounter, engagement, and exchange between the body and the building, I am aiming to centre the body at the heart of the critique of Walmer Yard.

CREDITS

All photos by Jim Stephenson with Laura Mark.

11 Singh, ‘The Body Archive’, pp. 29-56.

12 Laura Griffiths, ‘Between Bodies and the Archive: Situating the Act’, *International Journal of Performance Arts & Digital Media*, 9.1 (2013), pp. 183-95.

13 Baum, *The Body as Archive*, pp. 667-693

14 Ibid.

15 Griffiths, ‘Between Bodies and the Archive’, pp. 183-195.

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Laura Mark is an award-winning architecture critic, curator, editor, and researcher. Laura is undertaking a PhD at Newcastle University which considers the care and maintenance of domestic spaces through an autoethnographic study of the house museum, with a particular focus on her time as Keeper at Walmer Yard. Laura is currently Head of Casework at the C20 Society. Before joining the C20 Society, Laura co-led the undergraduate first year at Sheffield School of Architecture and taught humanities and research courses throughout the undergraduate and masters programmes. She has previously taught at the Bartlett School of Architecture, University of Greenwich, the Birmingham School of Architecture and Design, and Sweden's UMEA University. Trained as an architect, Laura worked in architectural practice before joining the editorial team of the Architects' Journal. She has also held curatorial positions at both Walmer Yard and the Royal Academy of Arts.

