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memory in suspension: chinatown lost and found

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abstract

Who holds the right to decide what gets remembered? Conversely, the right to forget? The interior architecture installation, *Memory in Suspension*, exhibited in Toronto's Chinatown West as part of Museum of Toronto's 2020 Intersections Festival at Cecil Community Centre, combines new and old technologies to tell the forgotten stories, wilful omissions, and accumulation of silences that exist beyond Toronto's official heritage definition of its Chinatown neighbourhoods. Foregrounding the lack of records and archival materials available, *Memory in Suspension* develops an alternative approach to heritage reconstruction when confronted with a historically significant interior which has no architectural records or documentation. By unearthing the unrecorded histories of the first Chinese owned business in Toronto, Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry, we explore what marginalised communities have known for some time—namely, all that is recorded is not necessarily all that is, and what is remembered extends far beyond what is recorded. Through interior architecture, Chinatown Lost and Found asks what we choose to remember and which tools and technologies keep those memories alive. This article explores how interior architecture can create a dialogue between official history and the associative nature of lived experience. Learning from these productive tensions, we suggest how interior architecture can use old and new archival technologies to empower community stakeholders to safeguard the future heritage(s) of Toronto's Chinatowns. In particular, this article links 3D scanning technologies to community memory and marginalisation to pursue a dynamic and reversal-based interior architecture approach that critically positions how subjects inhabit, constitute and are constituted by the spaces in which they find themselves. In doing so, this article offers a more holistic approach and account of the instability of space and time in relation to memory and heritage for interior architectural practice.

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introduction

History includes an accumulation of silences. It is a palace of unsaids, lingering with hushes, everyone hurtling through it and uncertain how they got there, moving from pain to ecstasy, from boredom to purpose.

— Rob Goyanes⁰¹

History is not a fact. In fact, the past constantly changes and redefines itself. We often think of history as something stable and solid. We hardly think about it as 'an accumulation of silences.'⁰² Instead, the past is presented to us through historical records, official documents, and objective facts supported by technicity—our world of tools and technical objects. Through technicity, we uphold an image of a stable past, a knowable history, and a fixed heritage. We draw from this kind of stable past to help us solidify and make sense of the present. Yet, the very act of recording something contains within itself the act of silencing something else. This feature of silencing in order to solidify is inherent in technicity itself.

Take 3D scanning as an example: 3D scanning is quickly becoming standard practice in architectural heritage conservation. It offers, for the first time, the ability to efficiently and cost effectively document the built environment, in contrast to the manual labour previously needed to survey sites of significant historical relevance and draft architectural drawings. And, as it become increasingly accessible, we are just starting to see it being used to codify alternative

heritage approaches to document community narratives as well as quotidian and everyday sites. Yet, like history, a 3D scan is not fact. When a 3D scan is generated, its algorithms erase all traces of movement, moving objects and moving bodies. 3D scanning software was developed as a global process, and as such, it relies on both triangulation and the averaging of hundreds of images to create a 3D reconstruction.⁰³ In so doing, anything that moves is averaged out across other hundreds of global images. This feature of the global algorithm both makes 3D scanning the ideal application for documenting static artefacts, but is ill-equipped to deal with living matter, life in motion. Written into its very algorithms is the removal of any surplus passers-by, pigeons waddling down the sidewalk, or passing cars. This erasure is not just the case for 3D scanning, but for all documentation tools, technologies, and devices, from computation to memory. In the end, even technicity is made up of an accumulation of silences.

At first glance, this relationship may seem paradoxical and places any claim these technical devices have for accuracy and objectivity into question. Like other technical devices, 3D scanners are not sentient, and thus we tend to assume they operate neutrally. A 3D scanner (purportedly) simply records what is there. However, this can be misleading when our technologies actually reflect and incorporate many of our implicit biases. Take 3D scanners for instance; does the averaging out of moving objects through its 3D reconstruction algorithms constitute increased accuracy or objectivity? Observing this question from another perspective, the

accumulation of silences might be the most natural thing about technicity. Like the 3D scanning algorithms, memory cannot exist without forgetting. To remember something, we must specifically focus on that one thing. This expressly means allowing everything else to recede into the background. Like the processes of re-remembering—gaps of lost memory are filled, and memories are collected and formed from others—3D scanning algorithms also fill in missing patches and holes by assigning them the average geometry of surrounding known points as well as the average colour from pixels of corresponding surrounding images. Thus, like the process of recollection, neither memory nor technological advancements can fully erase the accumulation of silences that make up collective experiences of the past. As much as we may want to resist it, this is actually a feature of memory as a lived experience of the past.

Embracing the incomplete and dynamic qualities of both technicity and memory, *Memory in Suspension: Chinatown Lost and Found* draws from the terms 're-remembering' and 're-collection' to look more closely at the process of putting fragmented pieces back together again. South Korean-born German philosopher Byung-Chul Han suggests in *Shan Zhai: Deconstruction in Chinese* (2011):

...memory images are not immutable representations of what has been experienced. Rather, they are products of complex construction by the psychic apparatus, and thus are subject to continual change. New constellations

and connections are always rising to alter their appearance... later events also reshape earlier ones... These memories are not representations that always remain the same, but traces that intersect and overlap.⁰⁴

This ability to re-cognise fragments and re-organise them into new constellations based on the present is one of the most fundamental and rich conditions of lived experience. *Memory in Suspension* unpacks this experience in order to push back on more conventional approaches to heritage conservation, preservation and reconstruction, which rely on original documents and historical records as a factual source and justification for architectural heritage construction. In contrast, Sam Ching & Company's Laundry—the first Chinese-owned business in Toronto—has no such records. Thus, developing a design approach for interior architecture reconstruction based on reversals and exclusions provided an entry point for how significant sites of ethnocultural heritage can be (re)constructed. Their status as extra-national sites have often placed them outside of official city records as well as official histories. Thus, *Memory in Suspension* aims to develop a more critical position towards the ways in which subjects inhabit and are constituted by interior spaces. In doing so, this article hopes to proceed with a more holistic (albeit not necessarily more 'whole') possibility of the way we reflect upon, represent and experience the instability of space and time in memory and heritage in interior architecture.

silences and omissions in the structure of memory

A more nuanced understanding of the structure of memory is illustrated in an exercise comparing memory to historical facts by novelist, poet, and literary critic, Ford Madox Ford, in his 1924 novel, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance*.⁰⁵ In this exercise, he comically and satirically recites a memory as if it were a fact, just to prove to the reader that memory does not actually work in a linear or factual manner. Rather, the structure of memory is much more dynamic and nuanced. Reciting my own memory according to Ford's deadpan exercise, it becomes evident that my memory does not say to me: 'on August 7, 2019, at 2 pm, I walked past Pearl Court Restaurant at 633 Gerrard St. East in Toronto's Chinatown East for the last time before it permanently closed on December 1, 2019 after 37 years of business.' Rather, when I think back about it, I will remember that Pearl Court Restaurant seems to have been there as long as I can remember, always a part of Chinatown East. I will remember walking by it on a warm sunny day, its green terracotta pagoda roofline glistening in the high sun. The angle of that sunlight will help me recall that it must have been late summer and I will fix the month to August. I will also remember the year as 2019—the second summer after I returned to Toronto after living abroad for a decade. I will not recall the exact date Pearl Court Restaurant closed; I will simply just remember that sometime after that winter, it was no longer open. And that, as we stayed home and socially distanced in the spring months of 2020, I wondered if anyone had moved in and if the new business would survive the

lockdown and the city's first historic state of emergency. From this recollection, I will fix the closing date as winter 2019.

This exercise paints a picture of just how much of our memory is made up of omissions and exclusions. Moreover, it shows the ways in which memory is formed as a constellation between disparate parts that are pieced back together. Meaning is constructed in the silences in-between. In other words, it is through this medium of constellations and relational network that the past is reconstructed and experienced. Philosopher and critical theorist, Walter Benjamin writes:

Memory is not an instrument for surveying the past but its theater. It is the medium of past experience [*Medium des Erlebten*], just as the earth is the medium in which dead cities lie buried. He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a [man] digging... And the [man] who merely makes an inventory of his findings, while failing to establish the exact location of where in today's ground the ancient treasures have been stored up, cheats himself of his richest prize... Epic and rhapsodic in the strictest sense, genuine memory must therefore yield an image of the person who remembers, in the same way a good archaeological report not only informs us about the strata from which its findings originate, but also gives an account of the strata which first had to be broken through.⁰⁶

Benjamin's analogy of excavation and memory suggests that the richest 'treasure' does not lie within the retrieved object but rather the journey through the various layers of strata. It is a reminder to look for the intangible and immaterial relationship between things, not the things in themselves. Which strata lay adjacent to one another, which ones were traversed, in which order, and when: these make up the fullness or richness of memory with regard to a lived experience, and yet, this is precisely what is left out by technical tools for recording and archiving the past. Technological advancements allow for 3D scanning to document every object, and yet can fail to capture Benjamin's unearthed treasures. Wrapped up in engineering efficiency and precision, 3D scanning software developers offer no data management tools for immaterial and intangible heritage collection, sorting or analysis. This mainstream mentality is exemplified by the slogan for *Pix4D*—a photogrammetry software for professional drone mapping—which states, 'make better decisions with accurate 3D maps and models.'⁰⁷ As we start to collect more and more 3D scanned objects of the past and present, what is omitted and excluded in its wake also starts to become more apparent. Made accessible through a method called photogrammetry, today's smartphone 3D scanning apps (such as structure.IO, display.land, Matterport and Trnio) have even become popular beyond preservationist circles. In the wake of capturing almost everything lies a trail of omissions and silences: how do these technologies blend with reality to shape, inform, and impact our built environment?

How can all this new data be utilised in the field of interior architecture?

The interior architecture installation and temporary historic reconstruction *Memory in Suspension* responded to these questions by using 3D scanning in dialogue with the selective and dynamic nature of memory to reconstruct the interior of a space where there are no official records. In so doing, *Chinatown Lost and Found* sets out to place what is lost in relationship to what is found. While mainstream heritage and preservation sets out to stabilise the past through the reconstruction of artefacts and things, *Chinatown Lost and Found* is a counterproposal which explores how technology can be a means for memory to negotiate the limitations of official representations of the past. Just as the strength of memory lies within the power of its omissions and silences to speak where word and things cannot, this approach uses omissions and exclusions to communicate where the reconstruction of things falls short.

technical silence and exclusion in chinatown

Archival technologies and recording devices play an important (and implicit) role in what has been passed down and what is still remembered today. While technological advancements allowed for more objective and complete recordings, they are still limited by the relative expertise required of the user as well as the computational power and time based on technological specification—greater accuracy costs exponentially more. As a result, we continue to see content gaps and exclusions in official city records.

This is exacerbated for marginalised communities, whose value continues to be placed outside of what is considered state sanctioned heritage. With the expense and labour required by even the most advanced technology, many ways of life, built environments, and artefacts of collective meaning continue to go undocumented in these communities.

This could not be more apparent than in the legacy of Toronto's Chinatowns (Figure 01). Even today, its ethnocultural heritage continues to be marginalised by official representations of the past. In 2017, the City of Toronto's Public Art and Donation Policy expressly excluded commemorative ethnocultural donations requiring that 'work must feature a significant contribution from Canadians or be an event that occurred in Canada.'⁰⁸ Such city planning policies raise questions about the articulation (marginalisation) of ethnocultural heritage within a multicultural and global context: how is 'Chineseness' articulated and negotiated in relation to official national heritage, cultural exchange, appropriation, and diversity? In particular, Chinatowns are one of the few globally accepted (and acceptable) public (and overt) displays of ethnocultural heritage. In so doing, Chinatowns become paradoxically one of the most prevalent and architecturally explicit ethnocultural communities, while at the same time remaining marginalised within a larger national context. This produces a constant negation between two poles: from lost to found, from being left out of official histories to being celebrated as a multicultural site of inclusion and diversity. By engaging

with these tensions, *Memory in Suspension* aims to expand more critically on what these sites' future heritage(s) could be.

In downtown Toronto and at the date of this writing, two historic Chinese neighbourhoods have already been lost. One has vanished without a trace, and the other is marked only by a small commemorative plaque. Subsequently, two new Chinatowns have emerged, but both are also rapidly changing. Today, very little is known about the interior architecture of Toronto's first historic Chinese neighbourhood along York Street south of Wellington Street. From the 1870s to 1920s, the Chinese community settled in this neighbourhood. During that time photography was still too expensive for the mass market, and, as a result, had not yet become publicly accessible. Thus, the Toronto Fire Insurance Plans are one of the only remaining documents to officially record the site the Chinese community called home. Ironically, the Great Fire of Toronto in 1904 led to a massive redevelopment of this neighbourhood from 1910 to 1920, which displaced residents further west, to Elizabeth Street south of Queens Street—an area that soon became Toronto's first Chinatown, known today as 'Old Chinatown' (Figure 02).

Figure 01:

Photo of commemorative plaque on the grounds of Toronto City Hall where Toronto's first Chinatown once stood. The plaque was created by Heritage Toronto in 2007. It features a Toronto Fire Insurance Plan as well as photos from the City of Toronto Archives. It reads 'The first Chinese resident recorded in Toronto was Sam Ching, the owner of a hand laundry business on Adelaide Street in 1878. Though immigration to Canada directly from China was restricted after 1885, Ching was eventually joined by Chinese men who migrated from western Canada after helping to build the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway.' Photo by Linda Zhang, 2020.

Figure 02:

Site plan of the first Chinese neighbourhood in Toronto, showing its evolution 1880 to 2015, based on Toronto Fire Insurance plans. Visualisation by Linda Zhang and Amy Yan, 2019.

By the 1940s, cameras and 35mm film had become affordable, which made photography more widespread amongst the general public. While Old Chinatown no longer exists, photographs of its stores, gatherings, and festivals do exist in the official records of the City of Toronto Archives (Figure 03). By 1947, two-thirds of the Old Chinatown community had been expropriated controversially by the city council to make way for Toronto's New City Hall (Figure 04). Like the structure of memory, in order to make room for Canadian identity (Toronto's New City Hall), another part had to be erased, and in this case, it was Chinese-Canadian identity (Old Chinatown). These events were not uncommon in 1950s and 1960s; they echo many urban renewal projects in both Canada and the United States which replaced ethnocultural neighbourhoods with new civic centres. In Toronto, following the construction of New City Hall in the 1960s, Chinatown moved, for the third time, to its current home along Spadina Avenue and Dundas Street, known as 'Chinatown West.' By 1971, a fourth urban Chinatown known as 'Chinatown East' began to emerge simultaneously at Gerrard Street East and Broadview Avenue, in response to the increasingly unaffordable property values in Chinatown West. By the 1970s, photography, including colour photography, had become increasingly affordable, resulting in increased numbers of photographs in the City of Toronto Archives, many of which accompany newspaper articles from the time. However, photographs of interiors are still hard to come by. Scattered in private photo albums, records of this early Chinese-Canadian community were not yet elevated to the status of official heritage or public record.

Figure 03:

Photo from the City of Toronto Archive, taken in 1937, of Joe's Café in Toronto's Old Chinatown at 56-58 Elizabeth Street. City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, sub-series 0033, item 171, 1937.

Figure 04:

Photo taken in Nathan Phillips Square of Toronto City Hall, where Old Chinatown once stood. Photo by Linda Zhang, 2020.

Today, this situation is changing. Through the growing accessibility of cameras, 3D scanning, and social media, a new kind of public record is forming. With cameras built into our cell phones and the possibility to store a huge number of photographs digitally, a plethora of images of both Chinatown West and Chinatown East now circulate freely on the internet and in social media through hashtags and geotags (Figure 05). The possibility of 3D scans complementing these two-dimensional images is beginning to emerge in processes enabled by photogrammetry, an image-based 3D reconstruction technique that has become popular today because of its efficiency in producing 3D reconstructions. Through triangulation, photogrammetry identifies and links up hundreds of thousands of points in multiple images, enabling it to virtually reconstruct any object in three dimensions. The ability to carry out 3D reconstruction at an affordable cost and at such speed was unimaginable just five years ago. The 3D scanning app *display.land* was launched in November 2019 and features public 3D scans of hundreds of thousands of spaces and objects around the world, including Toronto's Chinatowns (Figure 06). Through this free smartphone app, an interior space can be captured and processed into a 3D model within a few hours. High-end 3D scanning company Matterport also launched an iPhone-based beta version app in May 2020 with similar capabilities, but its additional features are targeted towards the real estate market. This evolving landscape of archival technologies has begun to make the public preservation and dissemination of community histories and micronarratives increasingly accessible (Figures 07–10).

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Figure 05:

Images hashtagged under 'torontochinatown' on Instagram. Screenshot by Linda Zhang, 2020.

Figure 06:

One of a dozen 3D scans uploaded by user Harley Montgomery (@harls) on *display.land* under the geotag 'chinatown'. Screenshot by Linda Zhang, 2020.

Figure 07 (top):

Photo of drone 3D scanning process. Drone Pilots: Linda Zhang and Jimmy Tran. Photo by Amy Yan, 2019.

Figure 08:

One out of several hundred photos taken from a drone in the 3D scanning process of the Chinatown East Gate. Drone Pilots: Linda Zhang and Jimmy Tran. Photo by Jimmy Tran, 2019.

Figure 09 (top):

Point cloud visualisation of Toronto Chinatown East 3D Scan. These photographs (Figure 07–09) are processed through photogrammetry software to produce a 3D point cloud model in under one hour per flight. Drone Pilots: Linda Zhang and Jimmy Tran. Visualisation by Amy Yan, 2019.

Figure 10:

Photogrammetry process in Pix4D showing 3D scanned point cloud on the left and hundreds of geolocated drone photographs on the right which used triangulation to virtually reconstruct Toronto's Chinatown West. Drone Pilots: Linda Zhang and Jimmy Tran. Visualisation by Linda Zhang, 2019.

Research in this area started in the 1960s, but it has taken a very long time for the technology to become accessible to the wider public.⁹ Over the past few decades, there have been many advancements in computer vision algorithms, such as feature detection, matching of images, and bundle adjustments, but also there have been improvements in computational hardware such as the graphical processing unit (GPU).¹⁰ Today, anyone able to afford the technology can take photographs of a desired environment, load them onto a relatively powerful computer, and use commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) software to process them into a 3D model. In the case of the *display.land* app, photographs can be uploaded to a digital cloud where they are processed remotely, and the results are seamlessly sent back to your smartphone. Thus, like the photograph, the 3D scan will soon become just another everyday digital artefact requiring minimal labour, expertise or additional costs. This will undoubtedly affect how institutions as well as communities document their spaces of heritage and how collective memory is constructed.

Today, 3D scanning at an architectural scale is not yet accessible as a community tool; however, it has become accessible as a research tool. 3D scanning still requires expertise and training for both image collection and software processing. And it still requires purchasing specific technologies in order to capture images as well as process them, including drones, drone pilot training and licensing, infrared laser and LiDAR (Light Detection and Ranging) depth sensors, computers with high processing capabilities,

as well as proprietary software and software training. While the costs for these items have dramatically decreased over the last decade, it is not yet accessible to the public.

Current applications of this technology in my research include the annual 3D scanning of hundreds of storefronts, street traders and hawkers of Toronto's Chinatown East and Chinatown West, which are currently undergoing rapid gentrification. However, despite the ambition of this project, there will always be things that get left out and forgotten—things that are deemed worthy of our attention and memory and things that are deemed too mundane for posterity. Will the totalising precision and fidelity of 3D scanning also heighten what has been forgotten? As this feature of memory and technicity becomes exacerbated through 3D scanning, what is the role of interior architecture in attending to the rich prizes of excavation and memory? How can 3D scanning relate to lived experience? How can these new technologies be incorporated in a way that still fosters remembering: the weaving together of partial recollections that create a memory?

These questions formed the basis of a design studio which taught at the Ryerson University School of Interior Design in Toronto. Students were asked to place technical recording and archival devices (3D scanning, photography, remote sensing, surveying, etc.) in dialogue with archival materials held in the City of Toronto Archives to critically engage with heritage building: the decisive act of remembrance, which also includes the act of forgetting. The project presented here —

Memory in Suspension, by students Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park—operates as a case study for a dynamic and reversal-based counter-memory approach to interior architecture heritage.

memory in suspension: memory reconstructed

Memory in Suspension is a reconstruction of the interior architecture of Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry. The project is not a faithful reconstruction in the sense of accurately restoring something to a previous state; instead, it includes things both lost and found; it both records things and leaves them unsaid. Its refusal is both a critique of official forms of commemoration and, at the same time, a pragmatic solution for a site which remains largely undocumented.

Located at 9 Adelaide Street East, Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry was the first Chinese-owned business in Toronto, established in 1877 by its eponymous owner. The laundry itself was a significant business, and many more Chinese immigrants after Sam Ching would follow suit in opening laundries, as they required little investment. By 1902, there were more than 100 Chinese-run laundries operating in Toronto. Not only were these officially registered businesses, but they were also a threat to existing Canadian laundries. In 1902, the Laundry Association of Toronto petitioned the City Council to place a licensing fee on new laundries—a move that would have prevented the Chinese community from establishing more premises. Through this petition, it is known that there were over 100 Chinese-run laundries at the time.

Similarly, while the name Sam Ching is quite well known today in the histories of Toronto, this is only the case because it was a legal requirement for his name to be recorded in the City of Toronto business registry. There is no documentation of the architecture of the premises, either its exterior façade or interior fittings. Today, all that remains of the former business is a sign that reads 'Ching Lane' located between two skyscrapers in Toronto's financial district.

Responding to this almost total erasure, *Memory in Suspension* develops an interior design strategy for the reconstruction of sites which cannot be reconstructed from traditional documents. It aims to expand reconstruction practices to include sites of ethnocultural heritage which often go undocumented by official councils and institutional documentation. In developing this strategy, it is important to understand how mainstream preservation charters emerged and developed. Current forms of preservation practices came to be codified after the 1931 Athens Charter and the 1964 Venice Charter, to the founding of ICOMOS in 1965, and finally culminating in the founding of UNESCO World Heritage Organisation in 1972. These emerged in the West during a time of rapid and widespread destruction of the built environment. Many European and Japanese cities were almost levelled by the end of the Second World War; while urban renewal projects in the USA saw vast areas of inner cities demolished to make way for highways. Out of this loss, a nostalgic longing for a rootedness in place emerged to counter the fragmented and alienating condition

of the rapidly evolving modern city. Both psychologically and physically, these practices centre on stabilizing the flux of the present by solidifying the past. However, this is not always possible. Things are not so simple. There is not the technological means (or the financial incentive) to restore, reify, and stabilise everything; only records of things that were already deemed important at that time remain. What was deemed unimportant is therefore quickly forgotten. Thus, while Sam Ching's Laundry has become an important part of Toronto's multicultural history today, this was not the case in 1877, when it was just another mundane business operating in the city.

Foregrounding the lack of records and archival materials available, *Memory in Suspension* re-constructs the interior architecture of Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry through

associative memory fragments from tangential archival documents. It draws from archival images, aerial photographs, 3D scans, and photographs taken from moments in the history of the Chinese community in Toronto (Figure 11). In 2019, Ching Lane was scanned by a drone—the site now occupied by high-rise office buildings (Figure 12). In the 1950s, aerial photographs were taken of the site during a moment of gentrification (Figures 13 and 14). Although no known photographs exist of Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry, we speculate from these images what the interior architecture of the premises might have looked like. In 1904, during the Great Fire of Toronto, in which many homes and businesses were destroyed, large swathes of the district were documented through photography for insurance purposes (Figure 15). It is because of its destruction that the documentation of its (lost) architecture exists today.

Figure 11:

Diagram illustrating documentation from four specific moments in the history of Chinese immigration to Toronto. Illustration by Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park, 2019.

Figure 12 (top):

Three-dimensional drone scans showing the façades which line the present-day courtyard where the first laundry once stood.

Drone Pilots: Linda Zhang and Jimmy Tran. 3D scan mesh visualisation by Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park, 2019.

Figure 14:

One of the earliest known photographs of a Chinese laundry in Toronto: Mr. Lee Hong's laundry at 48 Elizabeth Street. City of Toronto Archives, Series 372, sub-series 55, item 43, 1912.

Figure 13:

Aerial photograph documenting the gentrification the area underwent after the great fire. Aerial Photograph from City of Toronto Archives, 1947.

Figure 15:

Photographs documenting the destruction caused by the great Toronto fire of 1904, which destroyed some of the scattered Chinese businesses in the area. Photograph show the aftermath of the fire along Wellington Street, Bay street and Front Street in Toronto. Toronto Public Library Archives, 1904.

By arranging these associative fragments into a constellation, *Memory in Suspension* remembers Sam Ching & Co's Chinese Laundry without directly reconstructing it. Instead, it encircles the possibility of its enduring presence. Drawing from Walter Benjamin's 1932 essay, 'Memory and Excavation,' it focuses on the unearthed treasures, to uncover a constellation of objects around Sam Ching's laundry. More importantly, it foregrounds the geological strata from which it was unearthed as well as the relationship between found artefacts. In doing so, it suspends a memory of Sam Ching & Co materially, figuratively and literally.

Memory in Suspension is made from a series of suspended translucent textile panels which literally recall hanging laundry. Figuratively, the panels are suspended in the omissions between archival documents, four moments in the history of place captured using different technologies. Digital images are transcribed into the textile panels through large-scale laser cutting and denoted through cut-outs (Figure 16 and 17) The textile panels are arranged in a series of onion-like layers. The exterior layer captures the present day; each subsequent layer takes us further back into the past. Once inside the space, a glowing, transparent 1:10 speculative model of Sam Ching & Co's premises is suspended in the middle of the interior. From inside looking out, the various textile layers become increasingly obscured as they begin to overlap, just as time and memory begin to overwrite history (Figure 18).

As the students explained,

Looking from past to present, the interior fabric first examines imagery of storefronts of the first Chinese businesses in Toronto. The next layers show the great Toronto fire of 1904, which destroyed some of the scattered Chinese businesses in the area. After the fire, the area went through a process of gentrification, which is reflected through aerial photographs from the 1950s cut into the fabric. The outermost layer shows 3D scans of the façades which line the present-day courtyard where the first laundry once stood. A light radiates from within the central store, marking the beginning moment of an entire future community. Even if not officially documented, this memory will continue to be relevant in the creation of Toronto as it is today and the future of the city.¹¹

The model of the laundry is suspended at the heart of the exhibition space within a stretched cocoon of fabric, dangling as if it could be dropped at any moment, to signify the fragile nature of memory (Figures 19 and 20). As it is an immersive interior environment, viewers are encouraged to experience it relationally, drawing from

their own memories and experiences to co-constitute the immersive reconstruction. While the installation is based around fragmented memories and understanding, the intent of the interior reconstruction is for the viewer's own memories to be formed and simultaneously contribute and strengthen the work itself (Figure 21).

Figure 16 (top left):

Diagram of textile panels imagery. Illustration by Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park, 2019.

Figure 17 (above):

Textile digital laser cutting process photograph showing the void cut outs in the textile. Photo by Linda Zhang, 2019.

Figure 18 (left):

Memory in Suspension elevation drawing showing overlap from the layers of textile fabric which begin to obscure the legibility of each individual textile panel. Illustration by Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park, 2019.

Figure 19:

Section showing reconstructed model of Sam Ching's Laundry suspended in the heart of the interior. Illustration by Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park and Soon Park, 2019.

Figure 20:

Photo showing reconstructed model of Sam Ching's Laundry illuminated within the heart of the interior space. Photo by Linda Zhang, 2019.

Figure 21:

Photo showing viewers exploring the interior space. Photo by Linda Zhang, 2019.

Memory in Suspension not only blends analogue and digital technologies, the symbolic and the abstract, 3D scans and archival photographs, but more importantly, inclusions and exclusions. Through this constellation of lost and found, it sets forth an alternative citational practice that disrupts what academics traditionally understand as scholarship. This project's fundamental (im)materiality disrupts longstanding academic attention to texts (what is documented) as the primary medium through which knowledge is created and disseminated. Instead, *Memory in Suspension* showcases omission and exclusion as a means through which memory is not only formed, but also a form of knowledge.

By making the unsaid present, viewers inhabit, co-constitute and are constituted by the interior of the installation. By offering openness for interpretation, this produces the possibility of a collective co-constitution of the memory of Sam Ching & Co. Chinese Laundry. Viewers themselves create new narratives—ones that the designers could not have anticipated. For example, one visitor was drawn to the slight bowing of the metal hanging rods because this generated an affinity in their minds to the rooflines of the Chinese pagodas commonly associated with Chinatown architecture. In turn, this interpretation also co-constitutes an interior and an interior memory. What is important here is that it is what remains that leaves room for speculation: the possibility that things could in fact have been and might still be otherwise. This challenges normative heritage practices that put forward singular histories

that screen out other possible experiences of the past. In contrast, *Memory in Suspension* proposes an interior design approach where history is embraced as a constantly changing entity—as an accumulation of silences that allows memories of the past to emerge.

This approach draws from traditional Chinese landscape paintings, to which, unlike their western counterparts, a date is never assigned because the painting is never finished.

These landscape paintings are understood as a constantly evolving constellation that is literally co-constituted by its viewers. In fact, in Chinese landscape paintings, each successive owner of the painting adds their names with a seal stamp. Moreover, these added names and text co-constitute the painting. Byung-Chul Han elaborates:

Here art is a communicative, interactive practice that constantly changes even the artwork's appearance. Subsequent viewers of the picture take part in its creation... from the start Chinese paintings are designed to facilitate later inscriptions. With areas of the picture left empty as communicative spaces, they directly invite viewers to inscribe themselves.¹²

Through this approach, we hope that alternative and diverse citational practices can emerge *through* the materials produced and how viewers engage with them. *Memory in Suspension*, therefore, acts as a case study exploring how immaterial reality can be represented through interior architecture. In so doing, it makes clear what marginalised

communities in cities have known for some time—that all that is written is not necessarily all that is, and what is remembered extends far beyond what is recorded. In challenging what is considered a ‘record,’ this project defines the past differently and also challenges what it means to define history. Definitions are not only made by what our technologies and tools are able to record; they are also about the choices we make—how and what we choose to include and exclude.

As memories fade over time, and as the Chinese diaspora in Toronto continues to be displaced from York Street to Elizabeth Street, to Spadina Avenue, to Gerrard Street East, to the suburbs of the Great Toronto Area, very little information on these first businesses exists today. As an immersive interior experience, *Memory in Suspension* presents a fragmented history of the first Chinese businesses and the evolution of their spaces over time. In an exhibition that features an architectural interior, we ask the viewer: what do we choose to remember? What tools and technologies are keeping these memories alive? How can interior architecture create a dialogue between official history and the associative nature of lived experience? Learning from these productive tensions, interior architecture can use archival technologies to empower community stakeholders to safeguard the future heritage(s) of Toronto’s Chinatowns. *Memory in Suspension* explores these questions through the struggles faced by the early Chinese immigrants to the city, the artefacts they left behind, as well as the accumulation of silences that necessarily accompany them.

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Toronto/Tkaronto is the traditional territories of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee and Wendat and continues to be home to many Indigenous peoples. Together we all exist under the Dish With One Spoon Treaty and, as we learn from Indigenous teachings, it is our responsibility together to protect the land. I express my gratitude to the original caretakers of the land and am thankful to be working on this shared land. Toronto's

Chinatown West is located along Spadina Ave which has its roots in the Ojibwe word "Ishpadinaa" (ish-pah-di-naw) which means "hill or sudden rise in the land." In the mid-18 century, the Anishinaabe peoples camped along what is now the northern end of Spadina Ave. The "sudden rise in land" provided a strategic vantage point to monitor activity to trade with the French at Fort Rouillé. While Chinatown West may be the most well known Chinatown in Toronto today, there have actually been several Chinatowns on different lands, both downtown and in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), both existing and erased. I invite readers to reflect on the lands of their respective Chinatowns beyond Toronto and to acknowledge and learn about the agreements of those lands, the nations that cared for and lived on those lands for thousands of years and continued to share and care for those lands today.

author biography

Linda Zhang is an interior design educator, a licensed architect and certified advanced operations drone pilot. She is an assistant professor at Ryerson SID and a principal at Studio Pararaum. She is a 2021 Artist in Residence at the European Ceramic Workcentre (EKWC) and was a recipient of the 2019 Multicultural Fellow at NCECA, the 2017-2018 Boghosian Fellow at Syracuse University School of Architecture, as well as a 2017 Fellow at the Berlin Center for Art and Urbanistics. Her research areas include memory, cultural heritage, and identity as they are indexically embodied through matter, material processes and archival technologies.

notes

- 01** Rob Goyanes, 'A Palace of the Unsaids,' *E-flux Journal* 84 (September 2017): 3, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/84/151296/a-palace-of-unsaid/>
- 02** Goyanes, 'A Palace of the Unsaids,' 3.
- 03** Edgar Hynes Thompson, 'Review of Methods Independent Model Aerial Triangulation,' *The Photogrammetric Record*, no. 5 (October 1965): 72-79.
- 04** Byung-Chul Han, *Shan Zhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, trans. Philippa Hurd (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2011), 10.
- 05** Ford Madox Ford, *Joseph Conrad: A Personal Remembrance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 180-82.
- 06** 'Walter Benjamin, 'Excavation and Memory,' in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: Part 2*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 576. Pix4D,' 2020 Pix4D SA, accessed May 17, 2019, <http://www.pix4d.com>.
- 07** 'Pix4D,' 2020 Pix4D SA, accessed May 17, 2019, <http://www.pix4d.com>.
- 08** *Guidelines for Proposed Donations of Public Art and Monuments to the City of Toronto* (2017), accessed October 24, 2019, https://www.toronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/8e09-A1702126_Public_Art_Donation_Guidelines.pdf
- 09** Thompson, 'Review of Methods Independent Model Aerial Triangulation,' 72-79.
- 10** See D. G. Lowe, 'Distinctive Image Features from Scale Invariant Keypoints,' *International Journal of Computer Vision* 60, no.2 (2004): 91-110, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1477-9730.1965.tb00401.x>; S.I. Granshaw, 'Bundle adjustment methods in engineering photogrammetry,' *The Photogrammetric Record* 10, no. 56 (October 1980): 181-207.
- 11** Duyen Nguyen, Jenna Buchwitz, Sally Youmean Park, and Soon Park Students, 'Memory in Suspension' Unpublished Manuscript (December 2019), 1.
- 12** Han, *Shan Zhai: Deconstruction in Chinese*, 34.