Abstract

This project asks questions about identity, place and the role of structures as memory aids. It specifically deals with the aftermath of having moved from one culture to another, and how being surrounded by a new and foreign architectural world can interrupt one’s connection to the sense of self. Working from the question “Can I recreate what I lost by using an imaginary architecture imbued with my memories?” I create what I call architectural ghosts, structures made with porcelain, wood, wire and metal as an attempt to replace the memory connections I lost when leaving Mexico.

Key words

Architecture, Self-built architecture, imaginary architecture, ghost architecture, memory, identity, migration, phantom limbs.
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Almost seven years ago I left my country for Sweden. And in that process something of myself was lost. A rift had formed between the memories and the self I had known in Mexico, and the me that found herself living in this new and unfamiliar place. I had changed, as had my artistic practice. What had begun as vessels had slowly morphed into something I eventually identified as architectural. At first I couldn’t make sense of what I was making, where this new expression came from – until the first time I returned to Mexico. It came to me in the taxi on the way from the airport. Through the cars’ side windows the suburbs of Mexico City rushed past us like concrete ghosts. Then, as the taxi came to a halt in one of the inevitable afternoon traffic jams, I started noticing the details. I noticed the black whirl of wires running between the houses, the half painted walls, the partially tiled roofs, the clumsily applied mortar leaving gaps between the bricks. This was what I had been creating, or unconsciously recreating, in my art. I saw now what had been lost. A part of me belonged to those buildings. It had known itself within their walls and oriented itself around the spaces between them. When I moved to Sweden that part of me had remained in Mexico. A connection had been broken. It was as if my body had been trying to construct something to reattach itself to. And this is what I’m still trying to do. My work is about the search for a new set of structures, an architecture that can help bridge the broken connection between disjointed memories, and within which I can attempt to create a new sense of self and belonging. Or to restate it as a question: Can I recreate what was lost in my move from Mexico to Sweden using an imagined architecture imbued with memories?
A few notes on my background

I'm a woman born and raised in Mexico straddling the deep crevasses of the Mexican class divisions. My parents came from what you might call humble beginnings, from the Mexico of self-built architecture. For generations my ancestors have been peasants and shoemakers. But my father broke away from the path walked on by so many before him and managed to put himself through engineering school, and with that pulled our family up to the middle class. Thanks to him, my siblings and I could attend some of the best schools in the country, making it possible for us to crisscross the social boundaries. In school we mixed with the upper classes. But when we got home and visited our grandparents and cousins we were instantly reminded of where we came from. Everyday we walked with one foot firmly planted in the lower class, in the self-built world of Mexico, and with the other on the polished marble floors of the ruling class. This is the well from which I draw my inspiration.

When I refer to self-built architecture I'm mainly talking about the constructions of the poor. Artist, theorist and critic Bernard Rudofsky calls this type of architecture non-pedigreed architecture (Rudofsky 1965, 3). It’s not produced by specialists, but by people in need of shelter. They use what they have when they have it. Architecture done by architects starts with a design followed by construction work. And when all the boxes of the plan are ticked the house is finished. But when there is no project and no design or plan to follow, there is no set end to the construction. You build when you have money. Which is not often. Because of this the houses of self-built architecture often look to be in a permanent state of being undone, as if the builders just stopped for a lunch break – with a wall left half-bricked and with a piece of tarp or a sheet of corrugated metal covering a hole in the roof. But many times they have been left that way for years, frozen in mid-process.
These houses are often built over several generations. The first builder starts to make a shelter to protect himself and his family from the elements. This shelter becomes the bones, the foundations, for future expansions. When there’s money the house changes and the owners start to replace the temporary materials with something more permanent. For instance, a piece of tarpaulin becomes a piece of corrugated metal, and then the metal turns into tiles, and wood turns into bricks, as so on.

Both my parents grew up with this type of architecture. I especially remember going to the house of my mother’s parents. Their house had always been and still is in a constant state of development. It started on a small patch of land in Mexico City as two rooms with bare cinder block walls. It was built to house just one family. But as the family grew and expanded and husbands and wives moved in and children were born, the house had to grow with it. Slowly and bit by bit as finances allowed.

When I visited there as a child I slept in a room with a broken wooden door that let in all the freezing air from the outside. I remember the rain hammering on the corrugated metal ceiling, making me feel I was more outside than inside. You might think of Mexico as always warm, but if you had spent a winter night in a house like that you would know it to be untrue. I have never been colder than the nights in that room.
Another memory from that house is the toilet. It didn’t have a door. Instead you had to drag a makeshift piece of rusty corrugated metal full of holes. The bottom part was bent from all the dragging and from the times you accidentally knocked it over. I hated that toilet. It left me too exposed and too vulnerable. This was a house built as a shelter for survival, not for thriving.

Normally you find this type of architecture far from the urban centers. However, sometimes you encounter it in the heart of the city as this type of self-built architecture often plays a part in the act of protest. Demonstrators from towns and villages all over the country come to the capital to protest on the streets. Many times they stay until they are either heard or forced away by violence. This means they need shelter. Using found materials like discarded wood pallets and pieces of plastic and tarpaulin they construct their homes of protest on the streets amongst the dog-walkers and latte-drinkers.

During one of my walks around Mexico City back in December 2021 I encountered the following construction. It was located in the middle of a street in Juárez, a central neighborhood occupied by design stores, coffee shops, restaurants and fashion boutiques.
From the outside it looked like a functional home. The wood structure on the right with the concrete slab is a laundry sink, suggesting that the construction had been there for some time.

At this point I want to raise my concern of romanticizing and exploiting these structures and the people who built them in using them for my project. There is nothing to be romanticized in the way the system has pushed millions of people into poverty, making having a house a luxury rather than a human right. But this type of architecture is close to me, and the experience of having grown up around it is part of who I am and directly influences the way I work.
Leaving Mexico, leaving me

I left Mexico in 2015 to study in Sweden. Since then I find myself straddling a new crevasse. On one side is my old country holding everything I knew about myself, and on the other Sweden, so unfamiliar, so different. When I moved I left behind not only my house, but also the place to which I had attached all my memories, and my entire language. I hadn’t been prepared for the profound impact the move and the loss would have on me. I had never considered that my own identity and sense of belonging was something that could be dissolved or disrupted. Had I known before I’m not sure I would’ve boarded the plane. I am different here. In the beginning my body felt out of place. I couldn’t navigate the streets or the architecture. Everything was too empty, too straight, too ordered, too quiet, too unfamiliar. There was nowhere for me to attach myself.

With time I have adjusted. I now reside somewhere inside the inbetweens. I don’t quite belong here or there. The longer I stay in Sweden the further I move from my former self. I feel my memories changing, transmuting over time like the house of my grandparents. What I left no longer exists, and what I have here is not yet my own. What’s left is to create something new, somewhere or something upon which I can attach myself.
Notes on Memory and Architecture

Before we continue I want to take a moment to outline my thoughts on architecture and memory and explain how I choose to use the terms and what I have chosen to exclude.

Architectural Ghosts and Phantom Limbs
First I want to talk about my use of the word architecture. Up until now I have used it in the traditional sense. But from here on we need another term. I see my sculptures and installations as representations of an imaginary architecture. In other words, I don’t see my structures or sculptures as houses. For me they relate to architecture in the same way as an architectural model or drawing is architecture. It’s not the building itself that is important, but the idea of the building. They are representations of imaginary structures, there to create associations and evoke our imagination.
The philosopher Jeanette Bicknel proposes a term for this: architectural ghosts. An architectural ghost could be anything from a structure that no longer exists, a photograph of a previously existing building, to structures that have not been built, such as unrealized architectural drawings or computer renditions. She goes further to write that:

“Limiting the aesthetic appreciation of architecture to structures that actually exist or once existed seems unduly restrictive, and so the aesthetics of architecture should also have a place for the appreciation of built structures that exist in imagination only.” (Bicknel 2014, 435)
This idea is echoed by architectural historian Shelley Hornstein when she writes about post-card images and memory aids: “architecture, whether or not it still stands, can exist or be found beyond the physical site itself in our recollection of it. We function always with what I call, an ‘architecture of the heart’, or a place within us that holds onto the emoting memory of a place. That place is the symbolic construction that connects our idea or image of a place to its physicality.” (Hornstein, 2011, 3)

Image 5. Berenice Hernández. Measures of the void, 2021. Porcelain and glaze. 32cm x 17.5 cm x 29 cm
This definition would then also include architecture described in the fictional world, such as literature, film, video games and virtual reality, and other “places you experience with your memory and your senses”. This wider interpretation of architecture gives me the room to rummage around more freely and lends itself well to my idea of creating an alternative space for my experiences. It allows me to use the fragmental memories I have from my life in Mexico, and attach them to fictional ideas of my own ghost architecture. The ghost structures of my creation could then be said to be as real as any other architecture in the physical world.

Another term or phenomena I feel apply here is that of the phantom limb syndrome, a condition in which an amputee experiences sensations, sometimes painful, in a limb that no longer exists. I see the phantom limb syndrome as a metaphor of my lost memories, memories of a bodily experience disconnected from my current life. And like architectural ghosts, the loss is experienced as a sensation, a pain in place of what once was. My body and my mind still experience the form of Mexico, the body of it, even when it’s missing. It’s hiding in my neural pathways waiting to appear, and sometimes causing pain.

“... its the absent limb that makes a show of itself, not the limb that is still present. It is characteristic of the phantom limb that it appears of its own accord, spontaneously and involuntarily, and recurs so frequently as to cause annoyance to the subject; it haunts him.” (Feldman 1940, 590)

**Architecture as a bodily experience (material imagination)**

Now we need to address the architecture in relation to the mind. I see architecture (and architectural ghosts) as something you experience with the whole body. It’s not just something you look at, it’s something that inhabits your mind and physicality. Bachelard called this material imagination. It’s when the experience of a material is shaped and formed by your memories and associations (Bachelard 2014). You sense the material through the experience of life lived. It’s a visceral experience. Even though you are looking at a photograph of a building, or the remains of a building, you feel the entirety of the thing as if it would have been a full scale
edifice. In that way I see my sculptures as association makers and memory evokers. They are there to give rise to imagination, to open gaps into myself (or yourself). (Christofides, C. G. 1963)

**Memory and Memory’s relation to Architecture and place**

There are countless books on memory and place and memory and migration and memory and architecture. I will say that I am first and foremost an artist that’s not overly concerned about factual truths. In the context of art, I should say. However what I do care about is emotion and emotional responses. So it’s in that vein I have thought about memory, not as a scientific discipline, but as a philosophical one. Also, in this paper I have chosen to limit myself to three basic ideas about memory. Namely:

1. Memory is closely connected to our spatial awareness and therefore place.
2. Our memories are often connected to objects and architecture.
3. Identity is based on memory, and since memory is rooted in our spatial awareness, leaving home interrupts your sense of self.

In the book Losing Site Shelley Hornstein writes:

“...each of us carries around an architectural imaginary world constructed in our memory that is different, parallel and even compatible with the physical site. This everyday and ordinary occurrence makes us all architects and curators of our individual built and imagined worlds” (Horstein 2011, 5)
This notion is what I think caused the experience I referred to in the introduction. The architectural world or construct I had in my memory no longer worked in Sweden. There was nothing I could map it onto, which led to a sense of having lost something, or even being lost. The idea that memory is linked to place is hardly new. The ancient knew about it two thousand years ago when they constructed their memory palaces to remember speeches. Memory palaces was then popularized again in the 1960s when Frances Yates wrote her book The Art of Memory. Simply explained, you take the thing you want to remember and place it in a room or location inside a structure or place you have previously memorized. This “palace” could be anything you know well, such as your childhood home or the path you take everyday from work. John Ruskin also had thoughts on memory and architecture in his Seven Lamps of Architecture when he writes (cited in Horstein 2011, 2):“We may live within [architecture], and worship without her, but we cannot remember without her.”

And finally we have the philosopher Paul Ricoeur elaborating on the bodily experience in relation the memory and place:
“The transition from corporeal memory to the memory of places is assured by acts as important as orienting oneself, moving from place to place, and above all inhabiting. It is on the surface of this habitable earth that we remember having traveled and visited memorable sites. In this way, the ‘things’ remembered are intrinsically associated with places. And it is not by chance that we say of what has occurred that it took place.” (Cited in Kitzmann, Andreas. Creet, Julia. 2011, 7)

So this makes out the basis for my definition of memory regarding this project, memory as something that is grounded in our experiences of physical places and objects. Which means that when we deprive ourselves of these places, when we leave or are forced to leave, or when they are destroyed or changed, we lose not only place or thing, we lose the anchor point that was tied together with our sense of self identity, it’s what keeps us from drifting away from ourselves and our versions of the world. We lose the thing that we associate with our very selves, making it harder to overcome the hardships of adapting to something like a foreign culture. Zofia Rosinska writes beautifully about this experience, and the migratory experience
in particular in The Melancholy of no Return, about the migratory experience as carrying with it a sense of estrangement, coupled with sadness, a search for meaning in life and a loss of identity. For a migrant, memory of home is what keeps one together. (Kitzmann, Andreas. Creet, Julia. 2011, 29-42)

It is difficult for me to see my life in Sweden as something stable, but six years have passed since I got here and my permanent residency card says that I will be here for a while. But I still feel estranged, and I still feel a bit lost. This place does not resonate within my body. I don't fully belong. But to tell you the truth, I'm not sure I even want to.

Recently I went back to Mexico to see my parents. I felt this immediate shift in my body as if it recognized the streets. Somehow, before my mind was aware, it knew where to walk. Automatically it took me to the same sides of the streets it had done so many times before. Past the same cafes, the same taco stands, and the same parks. But something was off. Something was different. I stood in front of places I had known for years, yet I couldn't quite recognize them. Now when I looked at them I saw them the way you see when you know it but only know it from TV. Like the first time you visit New York. You feel like you have definitely been there before. You recognize it. And yet you don't. Clearly something had changed, either in me or the place, or both. As I continued to walk around in my old neighborhoods I realized some buildings were missing. They had collapsed in the 2017 earthquake. These were old buildings. Much older than me. Yet they had disappeared, just like that. All I was left with was a confused memory.
Physical reality is fragile. Our buildings, our social structures, everything we rely upon is subject to change. Buildings, however, are large, heavy and sturdy. They give us an illusion of permanence. But an illusion is just what it is. They are as fragile as everything else. Earthquakes, hurricanes, mold, termites, developers, they are capable of destroying them. But this false sense of permanence might be a necessity, something to hold on to. Perhaps it would be too much for us to constantly contemplate the transitory state of everything living, to always doubt our sense of security. I believe this false belief is stronger in a country like Sweden than in Mexico. We are more used to things falling apart. And most of us are aware that home is not always a given, and that home is definitely not permanent. Yet we build our self-built architecture with the hope of making them permanent. We start with our shelters, using cheap and ephemeral materials such as tarpaulin and cardboard. Then hopefully we manage to replace them with metal and wood and then bricks and mortar. And so we keep going, striving for permanence but always changing. In the meantime, we spend our time fixing what’s broken. We have somehow convinced ourselves that this is just maintenance, and not the very thing that disproves the fact of permanence.

It’s with this in mind I create my own ghost architecture, to give myself my own sense of false permanence in a world conjured up by no one but myself. Now it’s up to me how I want to build it and change. Here I have full control of my narrative (or at least I will convince myself that I do).
The Method

For this project I’m constructing sculptures or structures using clay, wood, and metal. Clay is really the main material, while the other materials function as supports, the things that hold the clay in place. Which is not insignificant.
The way I use clay is not the most conventional way of using it. I don’t use a throwing wheel, I don’t coil it or pinch it, and I don’t cast it. Although I was originally a convinced and experienced thrower and still do value the craft, I have rebelled against my own conventions. It was when I set aside the wheel that something else took over, and I freed up an almost suppressed mode of making. Now I feel I’m freer to push boundaries (most of them being my own).

Using clay together with paper I create what later becomes my main building material. Soaking sheets of paper with liquid clay I construct blocks made from hundreds of these layers. Then I cut the blocks into suitable sizes either before or after firing. The order depends on whether I have access to a good stone mason’s saw or not. Sometimes I do neither. And what’s a suitable size depends on the scale of the structure.
Clay of course has been used as a cheap building material all over the world since the dawn of man. It’s perfect for building shelters. But my blocks are the opposite. They crumble and break apart into fragments almost the moment you lay eyes on them. I tend to use porcelain, so often the structures do have a strong and solid core, but around the edges they unfailingly break. This is exactly the quality I’m after. I wanted a material that made no sense, one that any respectable shelter builder would find absurd to use. But this was just the stuff that would be perfect to materialize the feeling of building a new life in this foreign country, itself being a sometimes impossible and absurd enterprise, bound to fail.
I work with simple and unglamorous materials. I prefer using cheap materials that I can afford to break. I'm not very precious about what I do. I take things apart, disregard conventions that sometimes come with working with clay, and substitute with my own ways and methods.

My sculptures are in a way ruins and failures. They constantly break apart when I assemble them. But that's what they are supposed to do. I remember the first test I got out of the kiln with this technique. It was useless. So fragile it crumbled to the touch. At first I was disappointed, but then I started to appreciate its qualities.

During the time when the experiment came out of the kiln I was going through a period of extreme uncertainty. I was confronted with a Swedish migration system that was overstrained from dealing with the 2015 refugee crisis. Not knowing if you will be allowed to stay is a terrible sensation. And the migration process was full of strange questions, rules and requirements that I was not sure I could answer or fulfill. The overall feeling was “WE DON’T WANT YOU HERE.” The process dragged on. Nobody could give any dates. It could take months, it could take years. I had come to build a new life, but now all of my plans and dreams seemed to turn into nothing. They were about to break. I was about to break. Any sudden movement could have caused either of us to fall apart into countless pieces. It was in this state of being that I finally saw the potential in my new fragile material. What I now had in my hands begged to be used. It’s unraveling (and my own) and becoming its best quality.
Initially my sculptures were small. They were the size I could easily carry. But then my ambitions grew. I wanted to feel how it would be to step into them. To see if the physical act differed from the imagined. So I started thinking about them as structures that could grow.

I have complete liberty. The only constraint is access to material and money. From there I improvise, much like the self-built architecture of Mexico. Like them, the structures I create often look half-built and unfinished, and you can’t always tell if you are looking at construction or ruination. Or both. It’s a method of crisis and uncertainty. That is the awkwardness I’m looking for. It’s the experience of being a Mexican woman in this part of the world, where everything is hiding behind an illusion of order. I want to unravel it. Shake it. Make it undone.
At the moment of writing this my exhibition piece or pieces have not yet taken final form. What I can say is that it will consist of at least one large scale structure using the methods and materials I described above.

I have prepared a number of large porcelain blocks of different sizes and shapes, and I’m still in the process of making more.
In addition to the porcelain blocks, I will use some pieces made with porcelain combined with wire. Those will in turn be supported by a scaffolding of wood. The wire and porcelain pieces have higher aspirations than being mere shelters. Instead they will mimic the steel structures they use as the load carrying foundations of modern buildings. Just like a self-built architecture aspires to stability and future permanence by over time replacing one material for another, my imaginary architecture has hopes of solidity. But in the end, it’s obvious to everyone else that this is highly unlikely. They are destined to break. Society’s perception of something broken is of something useless, without value. But I disagree. I even break things on purpose. I enjoy seeing them break so I can see them evolve. In my sculptures it’s the cracks, the lines, and the dark spaces in between that excites me. These are the gaps that provide the space for my memories. But it’s also about the traces they leave behind, the pieces that break off, the fragments, the residue. They also have value.
At this point in the project I feel that I have finally managed to verbalize to myself what it is I’m actually doing and have also created seedlings for other ways of working using the same question: Can I recreate what I lost by using imaginary architecture imbued with my memories?

When I moved to Sweden I lost the architectural world I had seen since childhood. All my memories and sense of self were connected to it. It took me some time to recognize that the sense of loss was related to the impossibility to connect my memories and my identity to my surroundings. My memories were incompatible with my new environment. There was nothing and nowhere for them to graft themselves onto. It was as if a part of me had been amputated, the neural pathways had been cut off. What I experienced was a phantom limb syndrome of disconnected memories.

I then decided to create an imaginary architecture that could serve as a tool for replacing what had been lost, something to re-attach myself and my memories to. I call this ghost architecture after the term proposed by the philosopher Jeanette Bicknel for structures that have either been built and lost, or never been built at all, but only existing on paper or in imagination.

While doing this research I could draw a line between the way I create my constructions and how the self-built architecture in my country is performed. In this type of architecture there is no plan to follow, no design or any regulations to adhere to. Because it is always improved upon, the self-built architecture is perpetually unfinished. Yet it still aspires to permanence, and it gives its inhabitants the illusion of stability. When making my own structures it was important to me to mirror this idea by using common construction materials such as wood, metal, wire and clay, and then turn them into something really fragile, something that looks partially broken or unfinished, to allude to that false sense of stability.

Conclusion
As I’m writing this conclusion I have just received my Swedish citizenship, and with that I’m faced with a set of new questions. For instance, now that I’m Swedish and this, at least in theory, is my permanent home, I might come to the point where I have resided longer in Sweden than I have done in Mexico, so I wonder – will I ever adjust to my missing phantom limb? Or will perhaps the structure I’m building, my ghost architecture, in its permanent state of being unfinished, only serve to perpetuate the sense of loss? Time will tell.

“The phantom limb, so it is reported, is subject to change. The hand gradually clenches into a fist. It also gets smaller and moves closer to the stump. In its final stage it is described as a fist of child’s size nestling inside the stump. These changes are evidence of gradual adjustment to the lacking limb. The body wakes up but slowly to the fact that a part of it is really missing. In one case reported, the phantom was still present after 56 years!” (Feldman, 1940)


Image list

Image 1. Unknown. My father in his house in León, Guanajuato. 1965
Image 2. Berenice Hernández. Self-built architecture in the middle of a street in Juárez neighborhood in Mexico City. December 2021
Image 4. Berenice Hernández. Fault line, 2018. Stoneware and porcelain. 18.5 cm x 15 cm x 8.5 cm
Image 5. Berenice Hernández. Measures of the void, 2021. Porcelain and glaze. 32cm x 17.5 cm x 29 cm
Image 12. Berenice Hernandez. Wire and porcelain explorations 2021
Influences and inspiration
It’s difficult to refer with clarity to my sources of influences and inspiration. But sometimes when I’m building my sculptures pieces of information unravel in front of my eyes. Other times somebody else points out connections between my work and my life that I hadn’t noticed myself.

The sources that influence and inspire me are too many to count, but here I have attempted to mention at least a few who I feel are relevant to this project.

The layer obsession
The foundation of my work for the past five years have been layers. For a long time I was unable to give an answer as to why that is, but then my father reminded me of my grandparents. They were shoemakers and owned a little shoe factory. As a child I often ran around playing in their backyard amongst the tall piles of layered leather waiting to be cut and turned into shoes. My grandmother spent countless hours gluing layers of leather together to make the soles of shoes. I remember looking at her, transfixed by her repetitive movements, the same movements I perform now when I layer my porcelain and paper.

The construction obsession
I have always been fascinated by construction sites. Perhaps it has to do with my other grandfather, the construction worker. He lived his life in close contact with the materials of construction. He shaped them, knew them and turned them into houses for others and then for himself and his family.
Artists working with spaces and architecture

Gordon Matta-Clark

I’m particularly drawn to Gordon Matta-Clark’s work Splitting. He cut sections of floors and walls from buildings that were about to be demolished. Sometimes the sections removed from those sites became the artwork, other times the art was created by the void left by the removed sections.
Doris Salcedo

In 2007 Doris Salcedo created a long and deep crack on the floor of the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London. The work was called Shibboleth and represented the borders and the experience of immigrants and of being the other. I’m drawn to her work because it’s charged with strong basal feelings of sadness, violence and struggle, but she delivers it in the form of powerful visual poetry.
Teresa Margolles

The Promise by Teresa Margolles is a project where the artist selected an abandoned low-income house in the border town Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, and had it demolished. She then transported the remains to Mexico City where they were crushed and compacted into a long rectangle.

In Ciudad Juárez more than 115,000 houses have been abandoned since 2007 due to waves of violence, financial crisis and unemployment. Teresa Margolles’s works touches me on a deeper level because she deals with the issues that are slowly breaking my country apart.