# Buildings, Time and Memory: W. G. Sebald's Austerlitz and the Revealing of a Lost Past

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## FORWARD

A colleague who teaches comparative literatures at the Université de Montréal recently suggested I read *Austerlitz* by W. G. Sebald. 'It's really a book about architecture,' he said. 'In fact, the main characters are buildings. It's an outstanding book.' I was intrigued.

## HISTORY AND THE EDUCATION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL EYE

One of the earliest recollections I have in my formal education in architecture was a string of courses in architectural history. The pedagogy was universal: lectures featuring slides of buildings, projected in a darkened room. Then, following the lecture, the same pictures, this time mounted on cards, were pinned up in the architectural history study room. We learned architecture, not by studying the building itself, but by studying its representations. We knew the building, not because we understood the experience of it, but because we could remember its image. Other buildings, those outside the canon of historically important monuments, were not considered.

## MEMORY AND THE FORMATION OF THE ARCHITECTURAL EYE

I was raised in a small city in Ontario. I credit my interest in the city, in buildings, and in the possibilities that architecture present to make life more meaningful, to the shape, form and experience of the city that, until I left for the larger world that university offered, I called home. Of course the city of my youth exists no more. Most of the old established businesses along city's main shopping streets have been replaced. Downtown has seen better days.

After my parents died, my siblings and I packed up the family house: a large, solid 1920s Tudor revival home, well built in its time. On the day of the final move out, I sat at the foot of the stair, remembering holidays, weddings, quarrels, celebrations, family, friends and strangers who had passed through the house. Now, when I visit aging relatives, as I drive along once-familiar streets, I see now only what is, but remember also what was—a market demolished and replaced, a row of seedy buildings bulldozed, the shining brass plates of historic addresses.

Without realizing it, the house and the city had been significant characters in my early life. They permeated my consciousness at every turn, became as familiar as family, and ultimately a part of my understanding of how life is lived. The breaks with the past have been gradual, distancing me step-by-step from time past: leaving home, settling in a new city, burying one parent, then the other, selling the house. While we move on, the memory of the place remains very much a part of us, present perhaps only in our subconscious, coming to the fore only by the trigger of one or more stimuli.

## CHARACTER, TIME AND NARRATIVE IN ARCHITECTURAL THEORY

Architects have investigated the relationship between built form and human sensation, most notably through the construction of the theory of architectural character, which saw its first, full expression in the 1780 writings of Nicolas Le Camus de Mézières (1721 – 89).[1] According to H. F. Mallgrave, de Mézières "places the matter of character almost entirely on a sensationalist footing by interpreting character solely through human sensations or responses."[2] Louise Pelletier explores

a full investigation the relationship between language and the sensuous space of architecture. For Pelletier, de Mézières presented a "spatial interpretation of the current experiential perception of temporality."[3]

This experience is presented in a compelling and engaging manner in W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*. In *Austerlitz*, however, any connection with the past is not there. In fact, the novel asks, what if it has been removed or erased, somehow, by forces outside our control or knowledge? What happens to us as we move through time and space, and suddenly encounter a place, that brings us back to a place we may have once known, but only hazily, and only faintly? What happens when the architecturally trained eye makes connection with places that hold personal memory? How do we reconcile what we know, with what we see and what we may feel or have in our hearts? Do buildings reveal to us not only our own memories, but also their own individual memories, beyond the personal?

**AUSTERLITZ: MEMORY AND THE ARCHITECTURAL EYE**

W. G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* begins in the Antwerp Zoo, but quickly moves to the main hall of the central train station in Antwerp, which is adjacent to the zoo. The narrator, whose identity is never revealed to us, meets Jacques Austerlitz, the central character of the novel. The narrator observes Austerlitz, who, unlike the others around them, is observed "in being the only one who was not staring apathetically into space, but instead was occupied in making notes and sketches obviously relating to the room where we were both sitting."[4] Through chance meetings, which include brief and extended discussions and exchanges mostly in specific buildings and settings across northern Europe, the narrator comes to know Austerlitz and his voyage of discovery into his past.

We learn that at the age of six, in 1939 just as World War Two was about to start, Austerlitz is adopted by a Welsh preacher and his wife and receives the name of Dafydd Elias. It is only after his parents have died – when the boy is still a teenager – that he discovers his real name but, apart from this, he knows nothing more about his past. Nor, can he remember any of it, which is somehow obscured in the folds of his mind. Aus-

terlitz becomes an architectural historian, working in a British University, and his professional life is focused on large-scale institutional buildings: train stations, court houses, museums, spas and other relics of the grand period of expansion in late 19C and early 20C Europe.

In spite of his curiosity about the world around him, Austerlitz demonstrates a particular and singular lack of interest in his background or origins. It is not until well into the novel – almost one-third of the way through – that events unfold and characters present themselves, which draw Austerlitz into his past, the memories of this past and imaginings about lost time. The characters, with the exception of two women and the narrator, are not people, but buildings, rooms in buildings, landscapes and places. These physical environments become the triggers for a release of Austerlitz's memory, a recollection of a life lost, and a discovery of his parentage, his inheritance and the fate of those who gave him up at the brink of war. The environments also present Austerlitz with the opportunity to see into his forgotten past, where more than his own past begins to reveal itself.

Interwoven with the idea of environment-as-protagonist is the idea of time: human lives are played against the lives of buildings; building lives are set against the forces of nature and history of civilizations; and civilizations are bound up with the lives of humans and over time buildings are understood and reinterpreted through artifact and collective memory. In this way Sebald constructs for us a circle of humans-tobuildings, buildings-to-history and history-tomemory. It is within this circle that Austerlitz operates and where he journeys to unravel the mysteries of his past. The journey is not only physical; it is metaphysical. In addition to buildings and time, the workings of

the mind become central to Austerlitz's unravelling of his past. The mind affords Austerlitz not only recollections of memories repressed but also imaginings of events as they might have played themselves out. These imaginings are always presented in the context of buildings, imagined or real, present or demolished.

## BUILDING-AS-PROTAGONIST

In *Austerlitz*, the book, buildings are the protagonists, leading Austerlitz, the character, to the revelation of his identity and a rediscovery of his past. Buildings are also lesser characters, suggesting in themselves the themes of time and memory, inherent in architecture.

The railway station is a key player. It is in the *salle des pas perdus* – the great hall of forgotten footsteps – that the narrator first encounters Austerlitz. The narrator draws an eerie connection between the nocturama he's just seen in the nearby zoo and the station. Like the simulated nocturnal environment for presenting caged animals, the waiting room of the station becomes a place of lost souls, in which travelers appeared as "a diminutive race which had perished or been expelled from its homeland."[5]

The railway station continues to appear throughout this novel, each time presenting fragments of a past and revealing different layers of meaning. It is a symbol of the forgotten masses whose departures and arrivals, fraught with emotions of regret and anticipation, were spent within the great vaults of its chambers. It is the representation of time, past and present, fleeting and exact. It is also a place where significant moments of Austerlitz's life take place.

The novel turns on a chance entry into a disused space in a train station. Austerlitz follows a white turbaned porter, who in his rounds of sweeping the station platform leads Austerlitz into a long forgotten room of the station, and into an irrevocable discovery of his past. In the abandoned Ladies' Waiting Room in London's Liverpool Street Station on a quiet Sunday morning that Austerlitz sees himself in the distant past, about to be collected by his adoptive parents. It is a slow and mesmerizing unravelling. In the dim light, Austerlitz sees not only the room, but also extends himself into the meaning of the space, which presents to him a vision of "imprisonment and liberation."[6]

> "From time to time, and for just a split second, I saw huge halls open up, with rows of pillars and colonnades leading far into the distance … I saw viaducts and footbridges crossing deep chasm thronged with tiny figures who looked to me … like prisoners in search of some way of escape from their dungeon, and the longer I stared upwards … the more I felt as if the room where I stood were expanding, going on for ever and ever in an improbably foreshortened perspective, at the same time turning back into itself in a way possible only in such a deranged universe."[7]

This kind of viewing, where Austerlitz not only sees the spaces, but also sees into them, reading their pasts and projecting on them their forgotten lives, continues to play itself out in the novel. In Prague, Austerlitz discovers that his mother Agata, an actress, decided to send her son abroad just before the war begins. A chance comment by Vera, a good friend of his mother's whom he meets, leads Austerlitz to visit the Estates Theatre, where his mother once performed. Austerlitz describes the place and brings us into the experience of the large void of the performance hall. At first Austerlitz sits mutely, then a movement of the theatre's curtain triggers a memory and a vision.

> "Only after a while, when someone or other walked quickly over the stage behind the drawn curtain, sending a ripple through the heavy folds of fabric with his rapid pace … did the shadows begin to move, and I saw the conductor of the orchestra down in the pit … and other black-clad figures busy with all kinds of instruments, … and all of a sudden I thought in between one of the musicians' heads and the neck of a double bass, in the bright strip of light between the wooden floorboards and the hem of the curtain, I caught sight of a sky-blue shoe embroidered with silver sequins."[8]

We learn that such a shoe was worn by Agata and had been part of her costume in the same theatre. The performance deeply troubled the young boy. "I was afraid Agata had genuinely changed into someone who … was … a complete stranger to me."[9] It is in the theatre, with the ripple of a curtain, in the void of the hall that Austerlitz receives a flood of past memories and recollections.

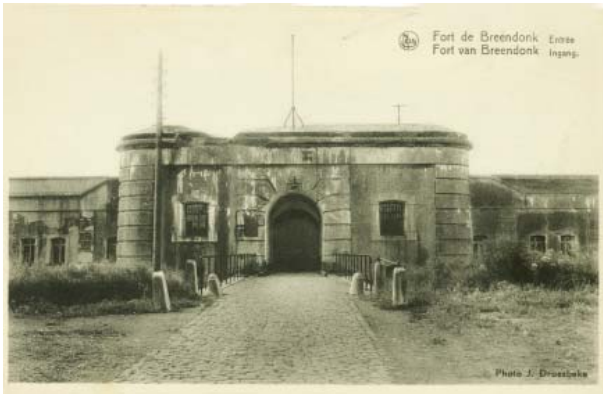
The intermingling of building / place / artifact / landscape with the past persist as Austerlitz deciphers his history and past life. At several places in the novel the reader is taken through disused fortifications and nearly abandoned towns. Within pages of the beginning of the novel, Austerlitz describes to the narrator his fascination with fortifi-

cations. Such fortresses in turn become significant in Austerlitz's family history.

We read about Breendonk, one of a series of fortresses built in Belgium through the nineteenth century to protect the port of Antwerp. Breendonk's completion, in time for the First World War, was obsolete within months of completion. We learn that the fortress re-emerges in importance in the Second World War as a reception and penal camp used by the Germans as part of their mass extermination of Jews and other undesirables. Our narrator visits the site and in an underground room the nauseating smell of soap connects him to past memories. With chilling prescience the narrator states "no one can explain exactly what happens within us when the doors behind our childhood terrors lurk are flung open."[10]

Sebald's precise and lengthy description of Breendonk within a few pages of the outset of *Austerlitz* presages the role that incarceration and the buildings of imprisonment play in this novel. In his journey of discovery, Austerlitz learns that his mother and father had been separated. His father flees to Paris ahead of his mother, who remains behind, eventually being deported to Terzin. Austerlitz is drawn to visit this place and travels there. He wanders the town, seeing almost no one, examining the setting. For Austerlitz the town seems to hold within it a hidden terror. "What I found uncanny of all," he states "were the gates and doorways … obstructing access to a darkness never yet penetrated."[11] It is only on seeing the exhibits in the Ghetto Museum, does Austerlitz comprehend the true meaning of this place.

> "… in the middle of December 1942, and thus at the very time when Agata came to Terzin, some sixty thousand people were shut up together in the ghetto … and a little later … it suddenly seemed to me, with the greatest clarity, that they had never been taken away after all, but were still living crammed into these buildings and basements and attics …"[12]




Through narratives such as these brought out through his experiences with the buildings that surround him, Austerlitz slips from time present to time past. The buildings-asprotagonists, suggest time lost or time forgotten or time imagined. His parents, their lives and their fate are made real to him.

## BUILDINGS IN/AS TIME

While Austerlitz is a moving narrative, the real journey is superseded by the metaphysical journey as the storyteller, moves from events present to internal thoughts to facts about buildings and places presented. Sentences flow without pause. Ideas and events merge, through many pages without paragraph breaks, without the benefit of neat breaks and crisp folds. There are no chapters, let alone chapter headings. Throughout the novel, the reader is conscious of time, but not in the Cartesian measured sense. Austerlitz asks the question "is it still possible to be outside of time"?[13]

A visit to the observation room in Greenwich puts the idea of time in the novel's foreground. Austerlitz poses the following questions to the narrator:

> "… If Newton really thought that time was a river like the Thames, then here is its sources and into what sea does it finally flow? … In what way do objects immersed in time differ from those left untouched by it? … Could we not claim … that time itself has been nonconcurrent over the centuries and the millennia? … (and) does not progress constantly forward but moves in eddies, … is marked by episodes of congestion and irruption, recurs in every-changing form, and evolves in no one knows what direction?"[14]

It is with this belief that "all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously"[15] that the author presents the building-protagonists in the novel, utilizing them in Austerlitz's journey of discovery. We discover buildings lost, buildings in demolition or buildings in current use dramatically different from their original intent. We find buildings renovated, buildings abandoned, buildings constructed on top of other buildings where new functions conceal the identity of the old. We find buildings with traces of the past and buildings that boldly ignore the past.

For Austerlitz it is the buildings that become the measures of time, or the signposts pointing simultaneously to past, present and future.

It is not surprising, then, that the railway station, a stop along the ultimate conquest of time and space, becomes a place where so much of Austerlitz's metaphysical journey takes place. It is no irony that the book's title and main character's name are the same as the famous train station in Paris. And it is therefore not surprising that in the closing pages of the book that Austerlitz, the character, finds himself in the *Gare d'Austerlitz* sensing the presence of his father, Maximilian.

> "I imagined … that I saw him leaning out of the window of his compartment as the train left, and I saw the white clouds of smoke rising from the locomotive as it began to move ponderously away."[16]

The station presents a foreboding, for Austerlitz, of his father's fate:

> "And I also remember that I felt an uneasiness induced by the hall behind this façade, filled with a feeble light and almost entirely empty, where, on a platform roughly assembled out of beams and boards, there stood a scaffolding reminiscent of a gallows with all kinds of rusty hooks … When I first set foot on this platform years ago … an impression forced itself upon me of being on the scene of some unexpiated crime."[17]

It is these building-protagonists, in time and outside of time, which connect the reader to memory, and lead the reader to draw together the circle in which *Austerlitz* the novel and Austerlitz the person are perpetually moving.

**BUILDINGS/PHOTOGRAPHS IN/AS MEMORY**

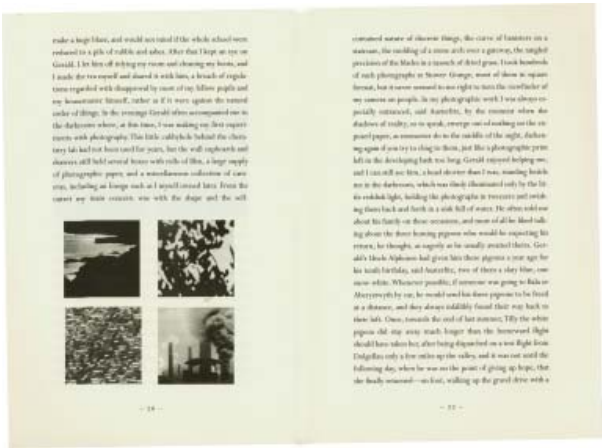
Austerlitz, like all architectural historians, not only studies buildings *in situ* but also gains his knowledge of buildings through research in archives, libraries and museums. He relies not only on texts but also on the photograph to record, recollect and assess. *Austerlitz*, the novel, is therefore filled with images, assembled and taken by Austerlitz, the character. The images serve as an aidemémoire for Austerlitz, providing clues on his search. The images – photographs, plans or documents – become Sebald's way of permitting us entry into the mind's eye of the character and narrator, allowing us the readers to assess for ourselves the importance of the places that are observed and recorded.

Often these photographs are presented not as entire subjects, but as abstract ideas or focused details. It is not the content of the photograph that is essential, but the idea that it conveys. Learning to use a camera at an early age, Austerlitz states, "my main concern was the shape and self-contained nature of discrete things, the curve of banisters on a staircase, the molding of a stone arch over a gateway, the tangled precision of the blades in a tussock of dried grass."[18] In this way, the novel becomes an amalgam of architectural history text and personal scrapbook, allowing the reader to form his own impressions of the significance of the images presented.

Pictures also appear to Austerlitz to have their own memory. By chance, two photographs fall out of a book of Balzac. One of the images depicts the stage of a provincial theatre, with two figures standing in front of a backdrop, painted with an alpine scene. Austerlitz believes the two figures to be his parents, while Vera observes of the rediscovered photo:

> "One has the impression … of something stirring in them … as if the pictures had a memory of their own and remembered us, remembered the roles that we, the survivors, and those no longer among us had played in our former lives."[19]

In addition to photograph and narrative, the unfolding of Austerlitz's memory takes place through and in specific buildings, which are repositories of memory. Austerlitz is a natural denizen of the library, museum and even zoo. These institutions appeal to his curiosity and contain the keys to his scholarship and professional life and. Not only do these institutions become places where Austerlitz's memory is awakened, but they also become



the locus for the author to challenge us to consider the idea of memory.

Austerlitz recalls his research at the Bibliothèque Nationale on Rue Richelieu. Austerlitz muses on the absurdity of the scholar's work and the contribution such places make to human memory:

> "Some years later … when I was watching a short black and white film about the Bibliothèque Nationale … it struck me that the scholars, together with the whole apparatus of the library, formed an immensely complex and constantly evolving creature which had to be fed with myriads of words, in order to bring forth myriads of words in its own turn."

While it is in the railway station that Austerlitz has glimpses of his past time and imagines his parents' fate, it is buildings representing memory that trigger profound lapses of time and emotional traumas. A visit to a museum of veterinary medicine, with graphic depictions of flayed horseman by an anatomist, whose disbelief in the "immortality of the soul"[20] draws Austerlitz to a fit of hysterical epilepsy. On another occasion, a stay at Mareinbad provokes in Austerlitz feelings of deep sadness and loss. Austerlitz recalls:

> "I kept thinking … that there were mysterious signs and portents all around me here; how it even seemed to me as if the silent facades of the buildings knew something ominous about me."[21]

The buildings stir a morbid sensitivity that stimulates his memory of a lost time and lost life.

In the end, it is the library, which gives Austerlitz an insight, albeit tentative, into the chaotic state of the human mind and the fragility of memory. In this case, the library is the new Bibliothèque Nationale, constructed in the suburbs of Paris. Previously, Austerlitz recounts a visit to the site and a chance encounter with a travelling circus. It is during the circus finale, a musical performance, where Austerlitz is transported into another place where his own fate and all those around him are known. Fittingly, on this same site, many years later, is built the new Bibliothèque Nationale where Austerlitz searches for records of his father's life in Paris.

Austerlitz describes in detail his access to this new institution. With its impregnability and inaccessibility, it becomes as a diatribe against the modernity and progress of the *grands monuments*. While the visits to the new Bibliothèque Nationale do not yield information about his father, the journey and experience of the building and the memories draw Austerlitz to see the paradox inherent in the institutions that claim to be repositories of human knowledge and history, and consequently the complexities inherent in human memory.

> "Sitting in my place in the reading room … I came to the conclusion that in any project we design and develop, the size and degree of complexity of the information and control systems inscribed in it are the crucial factors, so that the all-embracing and absolute perfection of the concept can in practice coincide, indeed ultimately must coincide, with its chronic dysfunction and constitutional instability."[22]

Dysfunction and instability become the characteristics of the new architecture of the Bibliothèque Nationale. The speed of the growth of knowledge and the "dissolution … of our capacity to remember"[23] accelerate the sense of loss of time, memory and identity. To Austerlitz it is this new architecture that seeks to erase the past:

> "The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near-ludicrous internal regulation seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described … as the official manifestation of the increasingly important urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past."

In the end, however, the key to his father's fate is found in a book, not a building. It is a book that Austerlitz had casually given to the narrator at the outset of the novel: a narrative of one other man's search for his family lost to the holocaust. The book tells us of the fate of Parisian Jews, transported to a disused 19C Russian fort in Lithuania, where more than thirty thousand people were killed during the war. Scribbled on the walls of the fort is the only evidence of the fate:, 'we are nine hundred French,' someone writes. The walls of the building, recounted through the narrative printed in a book, lead us to the conclusion of the fate of Austerlitz's father.

## THE REVEAL AND THE REVEALING

The seeing architectural eye comprehends not only the object that may be before it, but what might lie within the object or between its parts. In architecture, the *reveal* is understood as a "side of an opening or recess which is a right angle to the face of the work." It also, as a transitive verb, means "to make known in a supernatural manner."[24] In a similar way, the architectural moments in *Austerlitz* serve not only to allow the author,

through the narrative of the character, to move between parts of his life story, but also to uncover, what lies beneath, in the subconscious. What is within is revealed not just through knowledge, but experience. Personal memory and objective learning come together to form understanding.

The message of *Austerlitz* presents the possibility of theorizing about architecture in new ways. Louise Pelletier suggests that, prominent architects such as le Corbusier, Hejduk and Scarpa offered promising alternatives, in that they "addressed alternate forms of architectural program and considered new modes of temporal fragmentation."[25] Time and narrative have now a new meaning, encompassing "the irrational temporality of dreams, the fragmented juxtaposition of cinematographic montage … where our primary neuroses are no longer defined in terms of 'boredom', but anxiety (the fear of accelerated time) and depression, which make one forgetful to the past and blind to the future, in an unbearable and inescapable, fragmentary present."[26]

In the narrative of *Austerlitz*, and the twisted journey of its main protagonist, we are given a glimpse of this forgotten space-time. The discovery of Jacques Austerlitz about his past and its meaning, suggests an understanding of the "fragmented time of human experience, while projecting a space/time in which we might recover a sense of our wholeness as mortal beings who belong to a more-thanhuman world."[27]

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## ENDNOTES

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