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Between radical and reactionary imaginaries

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EDITORIAL

Nostalgia – typically understood as the longing for the past and the feeling of loss in the face of change – tends to be dismissed as a reactionary sentiment; one that repudiates modernity and progress, is steeped in myth-making, exclusivity and sentimentality, and, as such, is invariably deemed to be fraudulent and politically objectionable.

In the city, one could point to those trite instances where self-proclaimed 'indigenous' residents lament the disappearance of an imagined close-knit and homogenous community, as the thinly veiled premise for rejecting the social and cultural diversity of the present. Nostalgia is also often spun into the visions of urban planners, who are deft at legitimating structural changes to the built environment through pledges to recovering the cleanliness, safety, order, greenness or conviviality of a bygone era.

However, nostalgia is not just politically conservative. As the geographer Alastair Bonnett insists in his 2010 book *Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*, nostalgia has also been an important but rarely acknowledged aspect of the radical imagination. 'The idea,' argues Bonnett, 'that society can be divided between tear-streaked reactionaries besotted with the past and flint-eyes radicals staring into the future, has run its time' (2010, p.170).

The rhetoric of loss is, in fact, frequently implicated in the everyday strategies for the 'right to the city', such as the acts of resistance against gentrification and displacement that are mobilized in defence of working-class and popular histories. Meanwhile, critiques of, and responses to the deleterious impact of, say, neoliberalism, crisis or labour precarization upon urban life are often underpinned by a pining for a (slightly) better past. This gives rise to broader questions about the possible roles that nostalgia might play in a radical, future-oriented, urban politics and the ways in which this is articulated and inscribed in the fabric of the city.

This issue of *Lo Squaderno* sets out to explore how nostalgia shapes, distorts and reconstitutes the ways in which people perceive, experience and/or struggle in the contemporary city, be this for emancipatory or regressive ends. The collected papers seek to interrogate the underlying ambivalence of nostalgia in relation to contemporary urbanism across different social, political and geographical contexts and, in doing so, they diversely address ways in which forms of belonging and attachment are harnessed and contested.

Jan De Haes and Matthew Archer consider the paradoxical role of blues tourism in urban development strategies in Clarksdale in the Mississippi Delta. The authors vividly describe how the pursuit of an authentic blues experience on the part a largely white, high-income constituency is implicated in the reproduction of inequitable power relations and the depoliticization of memories of poverty and oppression among the town's predominantly black population. Hence, while the marketing of blues nostalgia has led to the proliferation of spuriously ramshackle juke joints and eateries, this has been offset by the allure of non-descript venues that exist 'irrespective of tourist demand, entrepreneurs or policy makers', where more intrepid visitors can experience 'real' blues, on condition that they take heed of the potentially 'rough crowd'.

Tone Huse takes us for an evocative walk around the vast housing complex Blok P in Nuuk, the capital city of Greenland, before and after its demolition in 2012. Once reputed to have housed 1% of the nation's population, this modernist behemoth became associated with social blight, suicide and substance abuse, and yet it was also the site of intimate attachments to place. Nostalgia becomes 'the organizing narrative of our shared journey', that allows us to take in memories of the coagulated seal and fish blood blocking the drainpipes, the farcical inappropriateness of the standardized apartments, but also recollections of unprecedented luxury and turf loyalties.

Marta Pappalardo scrutinizes the nostalgic imaginary that has framed the regeneration of the once wealthy central residential district of Wust-al-Balad in Cairo. The selective deployment of the past in order to transform

and promote this neighbourhood has recently been challenged during the post-revolutionary era by activists who have laid claim to the collective memories of the occupation of urban spaces such as Tahrir Square. Papalardo's paper explicitly underlines the contested nature of nostalgia and how this is embedded in struggles to reconfigure the city.

Juan Rivero discusses divergent forms of nostalgia that have been mobilized with respect to the disputed redevelopment of Coney Island, New York City's pioneering amusement district. He warns against reading the opposing political orientations of the redevelopers and campaigners through restorative/reflexive and reactionary/progressive binaries. Rather, the conflict is seen to stem from epistemological differences in the two groups' engagement with local history and their strategies for building on the neighbourhood's legacy. In doing so, Rivero calls for a more nuanced and grounded understanding of nostalgia in urban politics.

Drawing on political ecology and ethnographic fieldwork, Jeff Rose contemplates the reasons that led a group of homeless men to camp in unbuilt nature on the edge of a US city. While stressing the positive benefits of 'living in nature', these men simultaneously articulated their disdain for the urban environment in terms of lawlessness, impurity, and despoliation. Rose persuasively argues that, irrespective of their precarious situation, the men's anti-urban sentiments were in keeping with the myth of the US frontier and the nostalgic narrative of taming nature so as to make it closer to the more comfortable urban settings.

Finally, Andrew Wallace and Katy Wright reflect on the interconnections between the politics of nostalgia and deindustrialization in northern England. The authors contend that nostalgic renderings of industrial pasts invariably operate to erase memories of exploitation, environmental contamination and work-related pathologies. While this is underpinned by an uneven geography — whereby leading regional cities such as Leeds and Manchester are in a better position to indulge in nostalgia than others — Wallace and Wright suggest that as secure work and welfare disappear, the struggle to make sense of the histories and relations that constitute urban experience is set to become all the more intense.

Accompanying the issue are photographs and video stills from the project "Stratifications" (Naples 2011-2014) by the artist Carolina Ciuccio. Ciuccio's work tackles the issue of nostalgia in relation to the restoration of a domestic interior and, as such, provides a sort of rescaling of some of the processes that have been addressed in the contributions. In fact, while some of the authors consider the ways in which nostalgia fuels large-scale urban redevelopment projects, here references are made to the accumulation of meanings through the everyday, minor and often unplanned practices and events that inscribe themselves upon the built environment and that are sometimes nurtured by yearnings for the past.