How cities remember:
Delving into the places of urban memory and forgetfulness
Freshman Seminar, New York University—Spring 2019

instructor: Andrew Dufton  meeting: Th. 11am–1:30 pm
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office hours: Th. 2–4 pm

Since the earliest pre-urban settlements of the Neolithic, city-dwellers have reckoned with the physical remains of history. Earlier buildings, streets, and public spaces are either maintained or demolished to make way for new developments. Some people or events are celebrated with monuments or memorials, others are left to fade from memory. But who chooses what figures are commemorated, and what things we might forget? Which buildings are preserved for generations, and which are removed? How has the past influenced the present in cities throughout history?

This seminar explores how the built spaces of cities — and the people who live in them — interact with the past. Examples will be drawn from ancient and modern sites across the globe, relying on the cities of different places and periods to understand how memory shapes urban life. Weekly topics include places of collective memory, monuments to events and individuals, burial sites, ruins, heritage conservation, and deliberate erasure. Each seminar includes one reading that provides a theoretical introduction to the weekly theme, and two case studies that interrogate this theme in practical terms. The class is structured to focus primarily on group discussion and collaborative effort, with students leading conversations on case study sites and encouraged to draw upon personal experiences with urban existence.

The persistent presence of the past in the daily experience of city life has inspired countless literary and artistic works, and class assignments are designed to encourage creative responses to course materials. Assignments include photographic reflection on the surroundings of NYU’s campus, an extended biography of a monument in New York City or further afield, and a podcast surveying a story of memory from another city. Scheduled field trips to places of remembrance (and forgetting) in New York City will reinforce the ideas discussed in the classroom and connect the theory and themes of the course to the city we live in.

Learning goals

• Introduction to the predominant theories of collective memory, iconoclasm, nostalgia, and forgetting
• Creation of a shared terminology for discussions of memory in an urban context
• Evaluation of the role of the material world in making lasting impressions of place
• Direct application of ideas expressed in class to the analysis of spaces within NYU’s campus and across New York City more broadly
• Critical assessment of urban heritage and conservation practices in relation to the memories of various stakeholder communities
• Development of writing skills for a variety of academic and non-academic audiences
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Grade Breakdown

- Postcards from Washington Square (500 words) 10%
- Monument Biography (2500 words) 20%
- Tales of the City Podcast
  - Script/outline (2000 words/student) 15%
  - Final recording (5–7 minutes/student) 20%
- Case study presentation and discussion 15%
- Online discussion contributions 10%
- Class participation and attendance 10%

Course Activities

Postcards from Washington Square (500 words, due 5pm, Feb. 15th): What memories do you have of NYU’s campus? How would you record these memories in a postcard format? Take a series of THREE PHOTOS of the different places around Washington Square and write an informal, short text for each (c. 150 words). Pictures can have people in them, if necessary, but the focus of the image should be firmly on urban spaces and architecture and not on any individual or group. The text should concisely address your personal recollections associated with the image, and also how the material aspects of the city (buildings, monuments, open spaces, etc.) may be associated with this sense of nostalgia.

Monument Biography (2500 words, due 5pm, Mar. 15th): Using the example provided by Grant Parker and the Piazza Navona obelisk (assigned in the weekly readings for February 28th), complete a biography of a monument of your choosing either in New York City or elsewhere. Be creative with your selection. The biography should address the impressions of the monument in at least three different chronological periods and/or to three different communities. Successful biographies will not only outline these different histories, but also discuss how narrating the monument in this way can contribute a new understanding to its possible meaning(s) or effectiveness as a memorial. This assignment requires the full use of academic sources and referencing, and the inclusion of images is strongly encouraged!

Tales of the City Podcast:

What other stories of cities and remembering can we tell? Are there other lieux de mémoires that share the complex and contested histories of the case studies we discussed in class? Working in groups of 2–3, students will plan and record a podcast exploring a story of remembering, forgetting, or erasing in an urban setting — in America or abroad, in the present day or in previous times. The final result should include an open and engrossing discussion that introduces the site, outlines why this place in particular is important for memory, and questions the role of the material world in shaping the way we interact with the past.

The podcast will be undertaken in stages to provide early instructor feedback and produce a more complete result:

- **Topic proposal.** Meet with instructor to discuss a potential city or place of memory the week of April 1st
- **Script/outline** (2000 words/student). An outline/rough script of the podcast outlining the podcast site, structure, and key arguments or topics for discussion. The outline
must include the use of supporting academic sources and referencing. **Due Friday, April 12th at 5pm.**

- **Podcast recording** (5–7 minutes/student). Submission of a full, edited recording of the podcast (as an audio file) with a one-page summary of the participation of each group member. One submission per group, **due Friday, May 3rd at 5pm.**

- **Presentation of podcast.** A brief introduction of the podcast during the final seminar session, **May 9th.**

**Case study presentation and discussion:** Each student will present additional background details and lead the discussion for a weekly case study at one point throughout the seminar. Presentations will be **15 minutes in length,** followed by at least 15 minutes of additional discussion. Presentations should include the use of visual images and additional historical or other information relevant to the case study in question. Students should prepare at least **3–5 questions** to begin the seminar-wide discussion.

**Online discussion contributions:** Students are expected to actively participate in online discussions for the class on a weekly basis by contributing **at least TWO** posts per week to the NYU Classes forum, to be posted no later than the Friday after the corresponding seminar meeting. Contributions could include questions on the weekly reading material; references to current news or events; popular cultural references connecting to the course themes; links to online materials, social media, or opinion pieces; or responses to comments from other class members.

**Class participation and attendance:** The success of the seminar as a whole depends on a productive and open discussion amongst all members of the class, drawing on our collective experiences and differing backgrounds. Regular attendance and active participation are essential. All assigned readings for a given date must be completed **BEFORE** class, and students should come to class prepared to discuss with ideas or questions relating to the weekly content.

**Discussing difficult content in a classroom setting**

What we choose to remember — and forget — can be a complex and contentious topic. A spirit of collaboration is needed to tackle these questions of memory and erasure head-on in a classroom setting. Throughout the course we will be dealing with narratives and events of the past and present that may be disturbing or even traumatizing to some students. I am happy to discuss any concerns you may have before any subjects are discussed in class. Similarly, if you ever want to share your personal reactions to course materials—with me individually or with the class as a whole—such discussions are welcomed as a particularly appropriate and helpful part of our shared intellectual undertaking.

Students are also actively encouraged to question the motives and backgrounds of the authors of materials we will read, and even of my position as instructor. However, given that there are no ‘right’ answers to the questions raised by this class, it is absolutely essential that we maintain an open and meaningful dialogue even in potential disagreement. This course is a space where multiple voices are respected and fostered.
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Disability Disclosure Statement

Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities. The Moses Center website is www.nyu.edu/csd. Please contact the Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu) for further information. Students who are requesting academic accommodations are advised to reach out to the Moses Center as early as possible in the semester for assistance.

Texts

All weekly readings will be made available. There are no required texts for this course.

Weekly Schedule

January 31st — Introduction to urban memory

February 7th — How do societies remember?


February 14th — Space, architecture, and memory

Theory


Case studies: Çatalhöyük (Turkey) and Cusco (Peru)


*** Postcards from Washington Square due 5pm on Friday, February 15th***

February 21st — Spoliation and architectural reuse

Theory

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Case studies: the Arch of Constantine (Rome) and the Chicago Tribune Tower


February 28th — Monuments and memorials

Theory


Case studies: Baltimore and the Piazza Navona (Rome)


March 7th — FIELD TRIP (Monuments as sites of memory in NYC)

March 14th — Encounters with the dead

Theory


Case studies: The African Burial Ground (NYC) and Cape Town (South Africa)


***Monument Biography due 5pm on Friday, March 15th***

March 28th — Iconoclasm and erasure

Theory

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**Case studies: Ayodha (India) and Singapore**


April 4th — Forgetting

**Theory**


**Case studies: Washington, D.C. and Belfast (Ireland)**


April 11th — Ruins and urban decay

**Theory**


**Case studies: Detroit and Sardis (Turkey)**


***Script outline for Tales of the City Podcast due 5pm on Friday, April 12th***

April 18th — Heritage, conservation, nostalgia

**Theory**


**Case studies: New Orleans and Beirut (Lebanon)**


April 25th — Dark heritage and trauma

Theory


Case studies: the Athenian Acropolis (Greece) and the 9/11 Memorial


May 2nd — FIELD TRIP (9/11 Memorial and Museum)

***Tales of the City Podcast recording due 5pm on Friday, May 3rd***

May 9th — Tales of the City

Podcast presentations