

Urban Artifacts and the Collective Memory: The Postcard as a Memory Palace

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...I wanted to address it to you right away, like a piece of news, an adventure, a chance simultaneously anodine, anecdotal, and overwhelming, the most ancient and the last.

a kind of personal message, a secret between us, the secret of reproduction...

As an adolescent, when I made love against the wall, and I said to myself about them - you know, I told you

What I prefer, about postcards, is that one does not know what is in front or what is in back, here or there, near or far, the Plato or the Socrates, recto or verso. Nor what is the most important, the picture or the text, and in the text, the message or the caption, or the address...

You yourself explained to me that the jealousy begins with the first letter...

I have so much to tell you and it all will have to hold on snapshot post cards - and immediately be divided among them. Letters in small pieces, torn in advance, cut out, recut. So much to tell you, but all and nothing, more than all, less than nothing - to tell you is all, and a post card supports it well, it is to be but this naked support, to tell it to you, you only, naked...¹

— Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*

The bold portion from the above quote highlights the complexity of the inconspicuous postcard object, the built-in dynamic of its format. It reminds us of the life of the object alone, the layers of space, time, and content transcended by paper from the original aiming of the lens to the selling and describing of the image, the printing and distribution of the card, the purchasing, personalizing, mailing, receiving, and reading. For years I have been fascinated by this quote, as I send and receive and create my own postcards, yet I had shunned its context. I had all but forgotten that those words had not mulled and birthed in my own mind, but were a portion of a greater section, a greater book, a greater idea, another mind, or several. In decontextualizing the quote, I further objectified the object. In the fascination for the complexity of structure and multiplicity of reading, I drifted from meaning. In the study of the postcard, the bold section of the above quote reinforces our architectural sensibilities — the fascination and adoration of the multifaceted, communicative and well-crafted object; the rest of the passage reminds us of the power of love and memory.

There is an undeniable link between the concepts of place and



Fig. 1. Plato and Socrates from *The Post Card*.

memory. “Places are spaces that you can remember, that you can care about and make a part of your life”, that lodge themselves in our minds and that we long to return to.² The memory muscle is weak, however, and the art of natural memory has faded. We allow what we want to recall to drift from the mind and place it elsewhere, supposedly freeing the mind for other pursuits.

Donlyn Lyndon and Charles Moore spend the whole of *Chambers for a Memory Palace* discussing the noun/verb element pairs that might contribute aspects of place to space (i.e. “Borders that Control, Gardens that Civilize...”). In addition to reinforcing the idea that memory is an integral component of place, they express a reverence for two other concepts relevant to how we recall and discuss places. First is the format of the book, the personalization of

the information by staging it as a sequence of correspondences. Though not necessarily believable as true letter samples, the idea suggests that this information is somehow sacred, private, and that we the reader are catching a glimpse of friendship as well as memory. Second is their title, supported in the introduction by a cursory explanation of Marcus Tullius Cicero's "memory palace." By developing in the mind a spatial construction filled with well-ordered, discrete rooms and furnishings, each idea could be located in the mind and retrieved as necessary by traveling the rooms of the mental memory palace. In other words, "ideas were made memorable by locating them in space."³

Memory, to the Greeks, was a masterful invention "useful both for learning and for life" in ways long lost to a highly technological culture.⁴ The art of writing had not yet permeated society at large, so information, be it facts or philosophy, was disseminated orally, through soliloquy and dialogue. A strong memory contributed to both accuracy and duration of speech, and the training of memory or the development of "memory-aids" such as Cicero's memory palace is credited to Simonides of Ceos in 477 B.C. The principles of the Greek mnemonic involve the visualization of architecture, typically a spacious and varied building whose rooms hold objects, statuary, ornamentation, and images, each of which functions as a sign to spark the memory. Each piece represents an idea in the oration and is mentally accessed as the orator wanders in sequence through the building of his speech.⁵ The "memory palace" construction builds in the mind an architectonic repository of sequential ideas, a completely interwoven combination of context and content. The success of the mnemonic depends on two elements — clear order and clear sight (both external vision and internal imagination). From this time on, and likely centuries before in undocumented format, memories were not only generated by visiting places, but places were visualized to generate memories.

To both Plato and Socrates, dialogues and soliloquies were not vehicles for persuasion, but purveyors of truth. They feared that the ability to write would distance man from the art of memory and therefore from his moral convictions.⁶ In many ways, this became true. With the ability to externalize memory first through writing and later through photography, we created objects to remind us. We rely on them as memory prostheses and collect these objects of memory as if they were memories themselves. The reinforcement of the image with both informative text and layers of personal text, creates in the intimacy of the postcard, a sizable external memory palace.

Postcards, however, did not begin as personal memory palaces but as sales tools with the hope of becoming personal and memorable. The precursor to the postcard was the city-view, mass produced with the invention of lithography in the 1820's to encourage civic pride, yes, but also as promotional propaganda to encourage the settlement of one location over another. A distinctly American art form, the city view was pivotal in persuading English-illiterate immigrants to disperse throughout a growing country.⁷

Three types of city views were common — eye-level, slightly elevated, and bird's-eye perspective — successively providing a greater illusion of depth and a wider inclusion of landscape and context. After 1850 a shift occurred from primarily using the first two views, to a preference for the third — a perceptual as well as visual shift from verifiable reality to fantasy. The bird's-eye views were often fictitious constructions, relying on the imagination of the artist to fabricate what could not actually be seen. Unlike the previous views meticulously detailing the intricacies and uniqueness of a location, these artists become known as "outsiders," constructors of an image of space with no knowledge of place.⁸

The growing commerce of view-making only increased the distance between place and its representation. For the sake of sales, view-makers would manipulate widths and depths to include more structures and therefore sell more images. Axonometrics were employed for this very purpose — they lacked the non-sellable

perspective trait of diminishment. The rampant use of the grid in the landscape was mirrored in the city image, so much so that one image was often a tracing of another with only the major structures altered.⁹

In the post-Civil War era, artists began to look at lithography as an over-commercialized art form worthy of only mass-produced information such as posters, advertisements, and certificates.¹⁰ The technological advances of 1865, the steam press and color printing, also diminished the quality of the reproduction and with the introduction of aerial photography, lithographic city views became relegated to the documentation of a by-gone era in both imagery and technology.

The slight shift, however, in perception that began with a perspective of reality and shifted to a perspective of fantasy, was but a taste of the shifts in perception that were to occur in the 100 years that followed. The traditional understanding of space was one based heavily on the Renaissance ideal of perspective. Depth was extensive yet limited, mathematically constructed to a single vanishing point, creating a space that was still and unified. The viewer could place himself in relation to the constructed view at the ideal location, the center of a contained and finite universe. The technological and social changes of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries would change perception forever as we sped on a train then in a car then in an airplane, listened to the radio, watched television and went to the movies. Material technology changed walls from opaque and massive to transparent and floating — vision, light, and space leaked out in all directions. In addition to the dematerialization of mass, modern spatial sensibilities saw a uniform and infinite ground on which objects turned, floated, juxtaposed, or collaged.¹¹ Nothing and no one stood still, and the camera captured it all.

Life is a hospital where each patient is dying to change beds.
One of them would like to suffer in front of the heater; another
thinks he could get better next to the window.
It seems to me that I would always be better off where I am
not...¹²

We are nomadic and dissatisfied at heart, wandering the unknown for two weeks at a time. Though the tradition of travel began as a religious pilgrimage or a didactic experience for the elite, the explosion of tourism occurred as a result of those same technological advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that affected our social and spatial sensibilities — technology and the accessibility to it by the masses.¹³ Today, five-hundred million tourists travel yearly.

The masses became fascinated with their new found freedom of mobility and a magic new space in life called leisure time. They escaped the ordinary and explored the exotic, which was often anything beyond the limits of their daily life. Tourism was utilized as a revitalization, a symbol of status, a search for information, and a source of entertainment.¹⁴ Most of all, it was, and still is, a break with the normal routine, a departure that recognizes work as its opposite and the quest of the uncommon as its goal. Tourism is ultimately the search to fulfill (or at least locate) fantasy. "Men travel widely to different sorts of places, seeking different distractions because they are fickle, tired of soft living, and always seek something that eludes them."¹⁵ To gaze upon the uncommon or the extraordinary and to institutionalize this gaze by capturing and saving it, converts the temporariness of the trip into the permanent memory palaces of souvenirs, photographs, and postcards.

In addition to storing the memories themselves, the capturing and saving makes the trip ritualistic and sacred. Mechanical reproduction is one of Dean MacCannell's five "Stages of Sight Sacralization", recognizing that it is not just the visit, but the desire to take a fragment of it with you that authenticates the experience.¹⁶ The very nature of tourism is a discourse on authenticity, a desire to make sacred what is potentially easily accessible and over-commercialized. Prior to a pilgrimage, the tourist is aware of what John Frow



Fig. 2. Sequoia National Park.

terms the “essence” of his place of interest, its inherent importance as symbol.¹⁷ Precisely because of that essence, the tourist, masses of tourists actually, want to go to that very place and absorb the aura. The aura, however, is often lost with mass consumption. No longer do visitors see the objects themselves, but advertising and souvenir representations: “We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura... We’ve agreed to be part of a collective perception.”¹⁸ This collective perception allows, or, more precisely, forces, the construction of a reality through representations. It is the guidebook image or souvenir postcard that is accepted as the proper appropriation of the socially accepted gaze. Therefore the capturing and preserving of the gaze is “the fundamental process of consumption” for the tourist, and is maximized by the prosthetic to both the eye and the memory, the camera.¹⁹

Photographs appropriate what was once ephemeral or insignificant and establish slices of time compiled to create a seemingly complete and accurate history. Photographs serve as documentation, “indisputable evidence that the trip was made, that the program was carried out, that fun was had.”²⁰ In its most manipulative form, the process of taking photographs is also a means of refusing experience. The actual is transferred to the representational without ever going through the experiential. The goal of travel becomes the accumulation of images, not the enjoyment of the experience. This possession of the experience, resulting ultimately in the loss of that which is desperately trying to be preserved, indicates the shift of importance from interaction to simulacrum. The tourist simulacrum is both the postcard and the souvenir, the latter being more of a scale reduction of the actual while the former is but a slice of reality, showing selectively and discriminatively, pieces of the world aestheticized and recombined to create an interpretation of a place.

Historically, the postcard began as a trade card or visiting card. Combined with the technique of pictorial writing paper, the ‘postblatt’, in 1869, became the forerunner to the picture postcards available today. The first postcard was sent on October 1, 1869 in Austria.²¹ The postal service monopolized the market, produced and sold all postcards, postage included, and had strict regulations for card usage. In the first three months, Austria sold nearly 3,000,000 postcards. Seventy-five million were sent in the first year. Upon introduction in the United States in 1873, 60 million postcards were sent in the first six months. It was not until the 1880’s and 1890’s that the monopoly was broken and private printers were allowed to distribute postcards, though still strictly regulated.²²

The 1889 Paris exhibition initiated the use of color and enhanced decoration on the cards. Pictorial views of European scenery began to appear in the 1890’s and in the 1900 Paris exhibition, postcards were sold at the Eiffel Tower as souvenirs. The first US picture postcards developed as celebratory commemorations of events such

as the 1893 World’s Columbian Exhibition in Chicago, and as promotions for resorts, retailers, sellables, and, like the city views before them, towns.²³ Cities began to sell themselves through postcards as a matrix of attractions, the potential memory palace whose rooms are filled with the icons of a place — the art museum, the monument, the skyline, the luxury hotel, indigenous food, foliage and culture.

Like the photograph, the postcard is souvenir, art, and evidence. Both deal with appropriation and idealization of place; proof; the recognition and formation of types; democratization (or neutralization) of places and people; and an obligation to capture. Both support the authentication process discussed by MacCannell, giving a place or object credibility and importance merely by being documented. The postcard and photograph embody the new goal of the tourist - the collecting of gazes and the extension of the fantasy. The ephemerality of life is frozen, a moment is captured and preserved.

The postcard, however, can be perceived as the postmodern translation of the modern camera. John Urry discusses postmodernism as a series of recognizable alterations in cultural and societal ideologies, primarily a dissolving of boundaries.²⁴ Critical among these are the boundaries between high and low culture, between art and commodity, and between tourism and everyday existence. “Modernism conceives of representations as being problematic whereas postmodernism problematizes reality.”²⁵ Postcards have become practically iconographic in their role as commercialized culture, miniaturizing and commodifying famed works of art, monuments, pop culture, as well as tourist attractions.

Along those lines, postcards epitomize the three-minute-commercial culture. They are the summary of an event, a place, or an object — the Cliff-notes, so to speak. They represent a contemporary lack of commitment, a reduction of life-long goals to a combination of smaller events (i.e. multiple marriages instead of one). Historically, to send a postcard was considered an insult due to the brevity and inexpense. Said some, so short a message is hardly worth sending. The postcard format changed the way people write — “*Weather is great. Wish you were here.*” It is the written version of the drive-thru restaurant.

OR IS IT?

The tradition of travel is to expose oneself to the exotic; the tradition of the postcard is to share the secret. I take the risk to look through the peephole, but share it with you in both visuals and verbage. I send it to you — not *in* a letter, but *on* a postcard, bare and open, from me to you (yes) and infinite *voyeurs* in between. I take what is private and I expose it.

Held in the fingers of a hand, the postcard is collective image and individual sentiment, both sides of a door (public and private) equally exposed. It is social status (access to the exotic) and personal status (access to you); it places one in the world (by location) and one in the heart (by loquation); it reminds the world of my importance (traveler) and it reminds you of your importance to me (remembered). The sharing is collected like treasures.

We return to our introductory quote. Plato and Socrates, the pair infuse the list of opposites with a world of implication, anthropomorphising the postcard in both mind and body. I fit in your hands for a reason. I am both exterior and interior, glossy public image and bare emotional reality, fused and inseparable, the corporeal and the metaphysical. But neither side is expressed completely, only hinted at. The Socratic irony is recognizing what you **do not** know; the Socratic method is to tease you in the space between the lines, throwing what you think you know back at you as a question. “*Wish you were here.*” Do you really?

I would argue that, similar to the way the Golden Arches now flicker with nostalgia, we can return to postcards as markers of memories, both public and personal, that reinforce the history of perception and place. They *are* memory palaces, visualizations in



Fig. 3 Atlanta 1.

time and space of ideas and events one does not want to forget.

We can use Atlanta as an example. Established in 1837 as Terminus, this railroad destination quickly grew into the largest city in Georgia, then the Southeast. In 1845 it was designated Atlanta, the capitol of Georgia, and grew as a leader in both communication and transportation, boasting the first public radio station in the Southeast and still one of the busiest airports in the country. From the *Scenes of Atlanta* souvenir booklet, we get a sense of the vibrant, growing city:

Humming wires constantly flash messages throughout the world over lines centering in Atlanta. Trains filled with passengers and cars loaded with freight shuttle to and from the city over gleaming ribbons of steel; paved highways are filled with motor vehicles, while high overhead aeroplanes point racing engines toward the Atlanta airport, as the business of a widespread territory is directed from Georgia's capital city.²⁶

From the postcards we can extrude a sequence of facts and figures, visually and in text format: "over 20 buildings of skyscraper class"; "over a hundred and one hotels and restaurants"; "...the largest department store south of Philadelphia." We are able to make visual links from postcard to postcard, seeing the Ansley Hotel as a 400 room mass of luxury with bath and radio in one view, and as an edge of North Pryor Street in another. We know we are but "a step from post office, theaters, department stores, etc." when we walk out the hotel door, into the street full of the sound of trolleys, automobiles, and urbanites.

From the information given we can construct a sense of time and place. The vision of the city as a whole becomes the memory palace, and the postcards of moments and places become the rooms through which we wander. We easily understand spatial relationships, mass, and scale through the realism of perspective and the hints of colorization. We are there on the street, able to stand below the green awning of George P. Moore's real estate office.

We are also wandering the memory palace of Master Kenneth Hawkinson, who may be a grandparent now, or no longer with us at all. But we know, one night in 1935, Mother and Dad stayed downtown at the Hotel Ansley and maybe even walked a few steps to go to a show. Postcard stamps were one cent as they were in 1907 and in 1950.

The growth of the city made it less containable and the representation shifted to accommodate the changes of expanse and perception. Spreading beyond the city core, the episodic views captured in the letters of the name encourage the visitor to understand the city as a multitude of grand events. Like views through the window of the train or stops along the highway, the mobile culture was no longer limited to the attractions within walking distance.²⁷ The city became a series of experiences identified as single frames of a linear progression, organized by the unifying system of the postcard itself

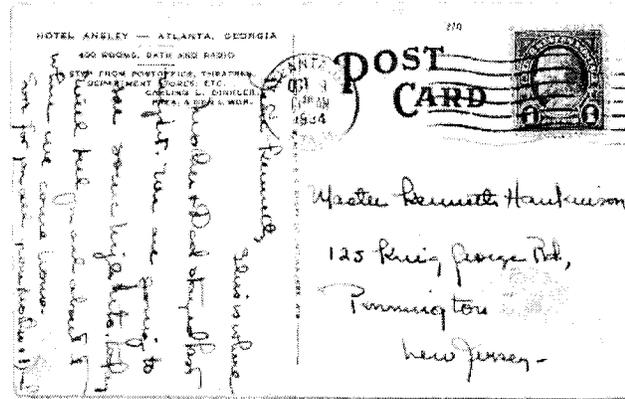


Fig. 4 Atlanta 1 - back.



Fig. 5. Atlanta 2.

and the name as an image. The postcard viewer is unable to inhabit or understand the whole of the place, but experiences it like a series of slides.

The contemporary representation is a vision of montage and multiplicity, highlighting the aspects of the city that make it both high-tech and historical. The single points of view are for the most part reminiscent of the fantasy city-view, elevated and distant or distorted. Unlike the pedestrian scale of the historical postcard or the monumental episodes of the second postcard, the buildings here appear as scattered fragments and juxtaposed masses with no clear sense of order or hierarchy. The combination of the images, rather than serving to clarify an understanding of the place, disorient the viewer and overwhelm them with options not answers. This postcard, front and back, is as well a moment in time — a birthday, a kiss, a dream — memory and love. The private text reveals sentiments nakedly expressed, emotions that span time and link us all.

In addition to inventing the art of memory, the Greeks understood the recollection of the past not as a piece of linear history, but as a concurrent reality. Memories were not past events, but clues to the present and a vehicle through which you understood the emergence of all being.³⁰ Plato and Socrates are the student and the teacher respectively, but the teacher is barefoot and illiterate (at least in history, but not in Derrida). The fictional character(s) in Derrida's book write(s) on the back of a postcard whose image is a contradiction. Plato is directing Socrates — poking him in the back, peering over his shoulder — who seems to be writing ferociously on command, with two hands nonetheless. The image disrupts our idea of the facts, questions lineage, places doubt on our memory. There are two sides to every story.

Like a postcard, the historical dialogue between Socrates and Plato is not about answers but about inspiration, not about what I know but what I encourage you to know about yourself and your world. The postcard is brief enough to not be informative, but long

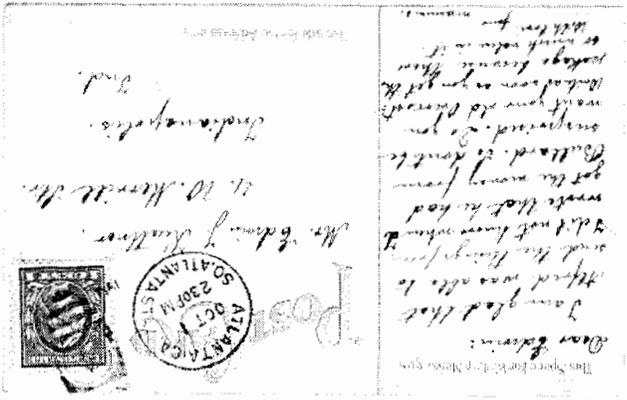
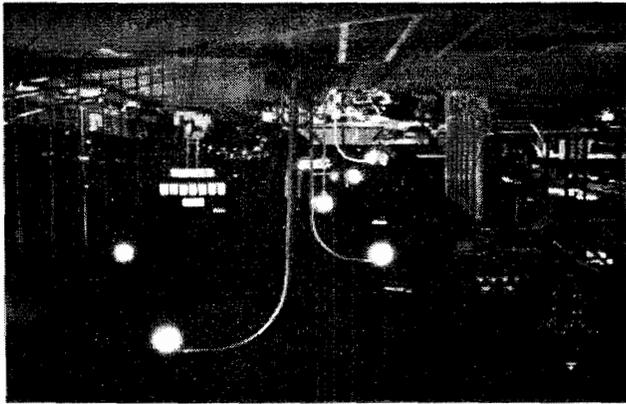


Fig. 8. Public Space, Atlanta.

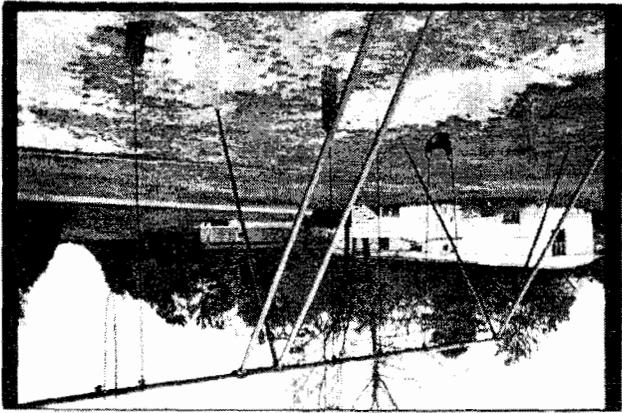


Fig. 9. Public Space, Raleigh.

world to read, yet somehow secretive and private. Postcards are covered and complex objects. Though evolving as a piece of our cultural, visual, and verbal fabric, they are one of the few things that have remained inherently the same since invention almost 130 years ago—an extra heavy piece of paper with both front and back, images and text—a portable palace of places and memories.

NOTES

- 1 Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 12-14, 22. [bold added]
- 2 Donlynn Lyndon and Charles W. Moore, *Chambers for a Memory Palace* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), p. xii.
- 3 Ibid., p. xi.
- 4 Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 29.

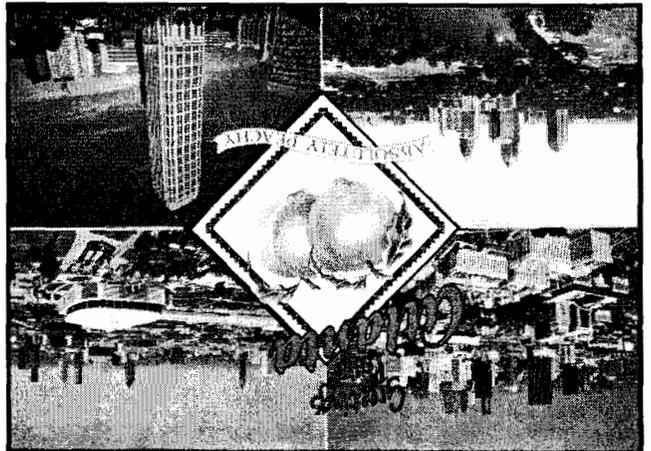


Fig. 6. Atlanta 3.

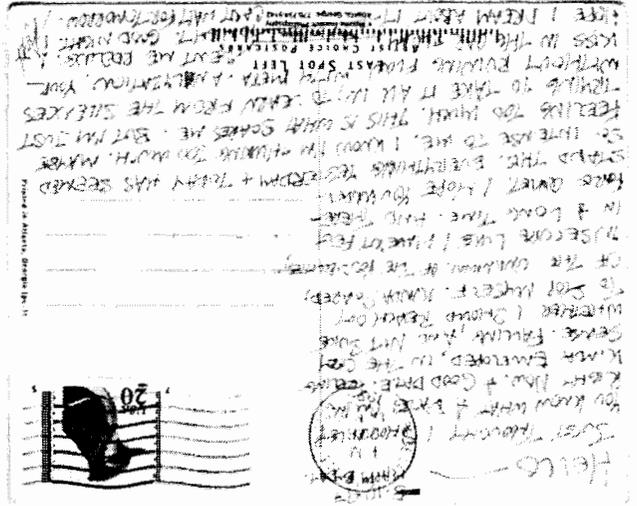


Fig. 7. Atlanta 3 - back.

enough to be enticing. Ah, to flirt is so much more seductive... My own postcard images and designs are reinterpretations of the ideas of place and memory. They are not the guidebook representations or the reinforcement of a collective perception, but a look at a reality of the contemporary social and spatial condition. They explore the inversion of public and private realms and investigate a place's identity alternate to its image as a series of attractions and icons. Occasionally, they juxtapose contemporary images with historical text, looking for new readings and new questions over time.

These creative explorations have led to a grant for the design, execution, and installation of a millennium new year's eve project entitled "Raleigh 2000 Interpretations of a Place." Based on the number 2000 as both a quantity and a milestone, the project assembles a collection of historical postcards, a team of artists, and a group of elementary school students to create 2000 interpretations of Raleigh, North Carolina (past, present, and future, respectively). Each artist is asked to open the door of his or her memory palace and invite the community to wander the rooms. The concept of the postcard itself is the key to the success of this community-wide interactive installation. The universal form and format, the manageable, mailable and collectible size make postcards accessible to virtually all economic levels and all types of people.

Postcards tell stories, make relationships, and evoke memories as well as their more obvious job of describing places. They are a unique part of our magical daily routine called mail—naked for the

- ⁵ Ibid., pp. 3, 29.
⁶ Ibid., p. 38.
⁷ John W. Reps, *Views and Viewmakers of Urban America* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1984), p. 4.
⁸ Ibid., pp. 3, 17.
⁹ Ibid., p. 20.
¹⁰ Ibid., p. 65.
¹¹ Steven Peterson, "Space and Anti-Space," *The Harvard Architecture Review: Beyond the Modern Movement, Vol. 1, Spring 1980*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1980), pp. 100-101.
¹² Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist, A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. xxiii.
¹³ John Frow, "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia," *October* 57.
¹⁴ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze, Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 4.
¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 2-4.
¹⁶ Dean MacCannell, *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 44-45.
¹⁷ John Frow, "Tourism and the Semiotics of Nostalgia," *October* 57, p. 127.
¹⁸ Ibid., p. 126.
¹⁹ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze, Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), p. 44.
²⁰ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1977), p. 9.
²¹ Frank Staff, *The Picture Postcard and Its Origins* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, Publisher, 1966).
²² Ibid.
²³ Ibid.
²⁴ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze, Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage Publications, 1990), pp. 82-83.
²⁵ Ibid., p. 85.
²⁶ R. & R. News Co., Atlanta, GA., *Scenes of Atlanta, GA* (Chicago: Curt Teich & Co., Inc, MCMXLII), City View booklet.

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