AUGUST 2026
ISSN 2974-8216

ADH JOURNAL ISSUE N. 06
HERITAGE CITIES AND OBLIVION

ISSN 2974-8216
9 772974 821004

ADH

ADH JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND HISTORY

HERITAGE CITIES AND OBLIVION

ISSUE N.6

ADH JOURNAL OF ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN AND HISTORY
The Journal of Architectural Design and History is a biannual magazine, undergoing a double-blind peer review process, realized within the framework of the UNESCO Chair in Architectural Preservation and Planning in World Heritage Cities at the Mantova Campus of Politecnico di Milano.



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GRAPHIC LAYOUT
ParcoStudio - Milano

WEBSITE
adh.journal.mantova.polimi.it

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Politecnico di Milano, Polo Territoriale di Mantova

ISSUE N.6
Heritage Cities and Oblivion August 2026
Edited by Samanta Bartocci (Università degli Studi di Sassari), Lino Cabras (Università degli Studi di Sassari), Annalucia D'Erchia (Politecnico di Milano), Luciana Macaluso (Università degli Studi di Palermo) and Claudia Tinazzi (Politecnico di Milano)

PERIODICITY
Biannual Magazine

ISSN
2974-8216

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY
Publi Paolini Via R. Zandonai 9 46100, Mantova

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BOOK

FORMS OF OBLIVION
EDITORIAL

Edited by Samanta Bartocci (Università degli Studi di Sassari), Lino Cabras (Università degli Studi di Sassari), Annalucia D'Erchia (Politecnico di Milano), Luciana Macaluso (Università degli Studi di Palermo) and Claudia Tinazzi (Politecnico di Milano)

> *Obliato*
> *oblio*
> *da un oblò.*
> *Oblesse*
> *oblige.*

Giancarlo Consonni[1]

Number 6 of the *The Journal of Architectural Design and History* chooses to address the theme of oblivion in relation to architecture – the discipline of design, the care of built heritage, and the history of architecture – by attempting first and foremost to restore to this term a sense freed from the dogma that confines the *term 's meaning* solely as the opposite and rival of the more reassuring "memory". In the most familiar and predictable narratives, the antagonist par excellence always plays the role of the "evil one" to be fought. Remembering rather than forgetting, emphasizing rather than erasing, knowing rather than ignoring, citing rather than censoring have always represented – in the positivist vision – the most common and, we might say, easiest actions in architectural practice, constructive and proactive drivers for investigating and addressing architectural themes of today and the past.

Certainly, the most common idea of oblivion unequivocally evokes a disruptive and inexorable effect that has permeated the history of architecture up to the present day, whether in the form of numerous political censorships, recurring erasures due to catastrophes of all kinds, or the neglect of a more silent and everyday practice, incapable, or rather indifferent, to the pace of the more famous masters. Thus, looking back, today – seen from the right distance and with legitimate detachment – there emerge remarkable and little-explored figures, the so-called minor architects who designed, maintained, and cared for our cities, or constructed architectures that – freed from the political, religious, and social yoke of a specific historical period – re -introduce new values and new contemporary possibilities.

There is, however, another perspective on the interpretation of this coveted term, well expressed in a story by Borges from the collection *Ficciones*, which tells the enigmatic story of Ireneo Funes, a young man whose mind, after an accident, opens to an absolute memory. Every image, every detail, every fragment of the past remains engraved in him with infinite precision. But this gift, which appears like a miracle, soon reveals itself to be a curse: incapable of forgetting, Funes is a prisoner of the memory that devours him. In this figure,

Borges shows the other side of knowledge – the one that reminds us that oblivion is not always an absolute and tragic loss in the outcome it leads to, but often a necessary condition. Oblivion becomes a form of selective emptiness that allows us to see the whole, to understand, to learn by learning from the past, choosing what to remember and what to forget, thus comparing and interpreting subjectively. In the project of forgetting, therefore, is not always a lack, but an opportunity to distinguish what deserves to re-emerge from what can remain in the background, in order to build new relationships starting from what has been obscured.
The *Essay by images,* within this multifaceted and plural reading, traces the gradual dissolution of the settlements established in Sardinia in the context of the agrarian reform during the early 1950s. Through photographic surveys of some of these centers, it is possible appreciate the complexity and richness of an initiative in which local planners and nationally established authors were commissioned to design newly founded villages, with the primary goal of activating multiple forms of civic participation. Schools, churches, community centers, and public facilities remain today as fragments of a forgotten map, reflecting the suspended state of places marked, on several occasions, by the abandonment of the communities that inhabited them. They bear witness to a historical period in which "minor" architecture provided quality responses to pressing housing, production, and cultural needs. The photographic medium, understood as a device for recovering memory, aims to restore these traces and examine the signs through which architectural and social projects continue to manifest themselves in the contemporary world.

This *invited essay*, in the form of an interview with artist Emilio Isgrò, conducted by Massimo Ferrari, addresses the paradox hidden in the Sicilian artist's work: erasing to remember as a measured strategy for confronting the world and taking a stand on reality. In this wide-ranging dialogue, Isgrò reveals how his *Erasure* was born as a conceptual and protective device to shield the words and treasures of our culture from the hypervisibility and censorship of the contemporary world, rather than as an act of destruction. The act of erasing becomes a selective void and a gateway to verbal thought, capable of stimulating desire, memory, and imagination. Through a dialogue with tradition and the new challenges posed by artificial intelligence, the artist asserts the propulsive value of memory, demonstrating how the right to oblivion and subtraction can become a prophetic act and an instrument of true cultural rebirth.

From the *archive*, or rather from the *archives*, which today, in a less systematic manner, preserve the memory of the invaluable work carried out in Milan by Arrigo Arrighetti – an architect serving the city between 1940 and 1979 – a multifaceted interpretation of the theme of oblivion emerges once again. Once again, erasures, but also substitutions and documentary gaps, increasingly affect, once again, "minor" architectures and, along with them, the work and professional profiles of their designers. In this context, tracing the events that transformed a historic patrician palazzo into a modern building open to the city becomes an opportunity to articulate – and denounce, through a specific case – the phenomenon at issue: *the conversion of Palazzo Sormani into the Central Municipal Library*, in an equally specific place and period – *the post-war Milan of the time*. It is a phenomenon that, alas, is increasingly pervasive in the heritage of our historic cities, ever more frequently *Affected by Oblivion*.

The lesson by Giorgio Agamben on memory as a vital tension of humanity allows us to reflect on the way in wich architectural design feeds on forgetfulness and erasure, looking to the past as a perspective rich in unfulfilled possibilities, renouncing the idea of innovation typical of

technological progress. The most distinguished architecture is grounded in continuity – the continuity of the construction of the city, of techniques, of ways of living... – without renouncing novelty or, in certain cases, a reversal of the point of view. Parts of cities disappear into the oblivion of time and catastrophes, only to re-emerge in other forms. At times, it is the architects and artists themselves who make certain features fade from memory in order to bring new values to the fore. Giorgio Agamben explores this theme in the *lectures* delivered as part of the Cattedra Uffizi at the Auditorium Antonio Paolucci in Florence on 7 November 2025, and at the Biblioteca Consorziale di Viterbo on 15 May 2026. ADH 6, in particular, refers to the latter for an integral view of the subject.

The *call for papers* for the sixth issue of JADH elicited a broad national and international response, leading to the selection of ten essays that examine the dialectic between memory and oblivion in the context of architecture. The essays collected in this issue articulate, without exhausting the different facets brought to the fore, the concept of "oblivion" as a critical resource for contemporary architectural practice, moving beyond the idea of passive preservation in favour of an active reopening of marginal, minor, or forgotten legacies. The reflection articulated across the essays unfolds through different scales and perspectives, beginning with an idea of *dissonant memory and urban oblivion* outlined in the contribution by Jannik Noeske, which examines demolitions and planning strategies at Berlin's Kulturforum, and by Nino Silva, who analyses the trajectory of Luigi Cosenza's former Fish Market in Naples, interpreting oblivion as an analytical category that traverses five "seasons" in the building's life. Valeria Valeriano explores the dissonant heritage of Dante Bini's domes in Puglia, engaging with non-canonical visual sources, including cinematic contributions, while also reflecting on unconventional tools capable of countering possible forms of oblivion. Anastasia Psoma and Barbara Scala propose the use of selective memory as a strategy for the regeneration of marginal inland areas, starting from the case study of Alta Val Trompia (BS) and the Coume di Irma. Several contributions address the theme of *new and old strategies of regeneration and recovery between memory and oblivion.* Andrea Crudeli addresses the theme of absence – first due to the effects of wartime bombing and then to the unfinished – in the San Michele in Borgo project in Pisa, developed by Massimo Carmassi starting in 1974 and partially completed in 1985. Stefano Monteleone discusses strategies for reinterpreting and then recovering ancient watchtowers from the ongoing abandonment of contemporary landscapes, such as the Capaci area in the metropolitan city of Palermo. In investigating *heritage beyond institutionalization,* the debate extends to global contexts. The research team composed of Campagna, Galbiati, Graf, and Marino analyzes the condition of the Marxer factory in Loranzè, raising questions about the future of 20th-century industrial heritage outside of UNESCO circuits. Haniel Israel shifts her focus to territorial policies and economic cycles in the mid- São Francisco basin, while Olena Kobets and Olga Konovalova raise the urgency of reclaiming heritage in war-torn contexts, analyzing the experience in Ukraine as an act of cultural resistance. Finally, Niccolò Arnaldo Galliano and Paulo H. Jr. Soares de Oliveira offer a critical look at demolished or forgotten architectural memories in Macau and more broadly across Asia. These are the result of ordinary urban expressions, but upon closer inspection, they represent unprecedented examples of the architectural quality of their context. The sequence of ten selected contributions demonstrates how architecture today must address the temporal and physical complexity of places. Oblivion, once the idea of irreversible failure has been overcome, appears as a necessary condition to allow the project to not be a mere repetition of the past, transforming the legacy into an active form of transformation of the landscape and the consolidated city, against an absolute conservation of everything

and the consolidated city, against an absolute conservation of everything without distinction, as a palimpsest of relics incomprehensible to the communities.

In the *Recommended section* curated by the editorial staff, Laura Ferlito re-examines Jorge Luis Borges's short story *Funes the Memorious* – a key figure repeatedly invoked throughout the pages of this issue – from the collection *Ficciones*. The commentary explores the enigma of a mind overburdened with detail, where the indiscriminate accumulation of memories turns total recall into a boundary for critical thought and imagination. In parallel, the book *Perchè Dimentichiamo. Una scienza dell'Oblio* by Sergio Della Sala, introduced by the editors, leads directly to the core of the inquiry: the ability to select and set aside information serves as a vital resource on both a neuroscientific and theoretical level, offering a dynamic, generative process essential for reprocessing experience, abstracting concepts, and opening up space for new design.
Rather than exhausting the reflection on the theme of *"Heritage City and Oblivion"* , which links contemporary research on architectural heritage between memory and oblivion, we believe that the contributions collected in this issue, in their different forms and potential shifts in perspective, have opened up a field of inquiry that still faces multiple questions. Reconsidering the methods and tools with which we look to the past requires, first and foremost, a solid and critical vision of what should and can be remembered. Funes's absolute memory is a prison that precludes thought and criticism; thus, architecture – as a discipline of making and transforming – can perhaps reclaim the right to oblivion as an exercise of freedom and necessary space. Forgetting, in this sense, means knowing how to interpret history, loosening the suffocating weight of legacy (sometimes imposed or pre-written) to allow the present to inhabit even the space of absence.

1. Poem contained in: JC d' Avec Sommeils. 2009. *Porthole.* Faloppio: LietoColle Libri. JC d' Avec Sommeils is the pseudonym of Giancarlo Consonni, urban planner and professor emeritus at the Polytechnic University of Milan who passed away in 2026.

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