# *The Memory Model Project*

## An investigation of three-dimensional models as triggers and documents of recall

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## Introduction - The Idea

As an artist, I have always found scale-models useful to simulate prospective works and to visualise how they will fit into spatial contexts. I have also often recommended models as 'thinking tools' to students in order to clarify creative ideas. So I have seen many little rooms and objects made of cardboard, wood, clay, and other materials but until recently I would not have described myself as a model enthusiast. Then, however, I came across the story of Wan Morshidi, a pensioner in Malaysia.[1] Morshidi grew up in a village named Kampong Dagang on the west coast of Borneo. In the 1970s the village was overran by the expanding city of Miri and had to make room for modern buildings. Not much had been left to remind of old Kampong Dagang until in 2012 Morshidi, then 76 years old, started to recreate houses that he remembered from his childhood in the village. Meanwhile he has made about 60 scale-models based on his memory alone and of which no other visual record would otherwise exist. A fascinating project and an approach to model-making that holds lots of potential for further exploration. Thus I started to investigate related artistic and autobiographical practices, the theory and practice of model-making and the concept of the home in relation to memory. However, the main part of the exploration is still unaccomplished. It requires collaborative, practice-based and further theoretical research to be undertaken. In the following I will introduce some ideas on what I have come to call *memory models*.

### *Memory* **and** *Models*

The concept of the memory model can be approached under more theoretical, in the widest sense memory research oriented, premises or by putting the primary focus on the practice of model-making.

### *The 'Memory Approach'*

When people unpack their memories, they do so almost exclusively through the medium of text – spoken or written. Photos may sometimes be available in support of the story but unlike text they cannot be produced 'on demand' to flash out places or events. The few exceptions (like photofits and sketched instructions on how to reach a destination) are hardly instructive for the purpose at hand and three-dimensional representations of memories, such as those of Wan Morshidi, are virtually non-

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[1] *"Gulliver's travels as Wan Morshidi remembers"*, article by Cecilia Sman in the *Borneo Post Online*, November 2nd 2014.

existent. Utterances of memories tend to emphasise their temporal aspects: People describe *episodes* and *events* from their past and we apprehend them by following the *progress* of a *report*.[2] However, places are crucial keepers of memories since episodes are necessarily located; in fact they are *"one of the main ways by which the past comes to be secured in the present"* as philosopher Edward Casey points out (Casey 2000, p.213).[3] Yet relatively little *time* is devoted to the description of locations compared to episodes and even if there is – some autobiographical writings contain admittedly fine examples[4] – the details are necessarily provided one after another and not, as in ordinary perception of space, holistically. In other words: spatial phenomena are translated into a temporal format. Three-dimensional models of remembered places appear as a promising supplement to the usual, narrative of recorded memories.

*The 'Model Approach'*

Almost anything has been modelled: buildings, vehicles, machines, animals, plants, people, landscapes, commodities, molecules, food, monsters, artworks – even economic principles and gods.[5] The procedure is basically always the same: take an object that once existed, does exist, or shall exist, determine its essential features and functions, and mimic it (most often in a different scale) using materials and procedures that create an appearance faithful to a referent. The model claims: *"This is how the original is"*, philosopher Max Black says (Black 1962, p.222), respectively it *"stimulates people to give accounts that could also be triggered by the object being modelled"* as John Monk argues in the *Book of Models* (2003, p.40).[6] In this paradigm it is clear that, whenever a thing from the past is modelled, its physical remains (e.g. ruins), photographs, construction plans, original descriptions, etc. are preferred over subjects' error-prone memory. Only very few model-makers have worked without such evidence and yet fewer have – to my knowledge – drawn the radical consequence to question the model paradigm and use the model as a medium of personal memories,

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[2] This is also reflected in the majority of scholarly accounts of memory phenomena. Philosopher Edward Casey thus ascertains that *"almost every treatment of memory after Aristotle ... was oblivious to the presence of place"* (Casey 2000, p.186).

[3] Casey elaborates: *"As embodied existence opens onto place, indeed 'takes place in place' and nowhere else, so our memory of what we experience in place is always place-specific: it is bound to place as its own basis"* (Casey 2000, p.182).

[4] A classic example is Thomas Mann's description of the house of the *Buddenbrooks* in the first part of his autobiographically inspired novel by the same name – especially the 'landscape-room' (Chapter one) and the dining-room (Chapter three). A recent and explicitly autobiographical example is Plum Johnson's *They Left Us Everything: A Memoir*, a book interspersed with graphic descriptions of the various rooms of the author's family home and the memories they hold (Johnson 2016). A number of related examples are also accounted for in Kathy Mezei's essay *Domestic space and the idea of home in auto/biographical practices* (Mezei 2006).

[5] For an overview see John Mack's *The Art of Small Things* (Mack 2007).

[6] An objective referent may *have existed* (e.g. an ancient settlement rebuilt as an archaeological diorama), *does still* exist (e.g. the reproduction of a national monument in a miniature park) or is *planned* to exist (e.g. a building designed by an architect). The criterion of the realistic copy includes not only concrete objects but also archetypes. This is the case, for instance, with scientific models (e.g. of molecules) or certain museum exposits such as Narcissa N. Thorne's reconstructions of living spaces from eight centuries.

embracing the distortions of forgetting and mental adaption.[7] It is in this vein that the model can adopt an as yet unexplored function.

*Document, Trigger, and a Precarious Referent*

Both approaches to the memory model share an interest in creating a new kind of *document*. On the one hand, it seems promising and appropriate to have spatial representations of spatial memories. On the other, there is an as yet unexplored potential of models to represent something they have not represented so far. But there is more to the memory model. When I tried to reproduce my own boy's room in model format, I realised that the kind of making-thinking process this involved triggered ever more memories – spatial and episodic details that surfaced only as I had begun to work on the model. Thus a memory model is not only a *document* but can also be a *trigger* of memories. To explore these two functions is my main practical motivation of the intended research.

An additional, more theoretical concern of this project is the memory model's wrestling with its promise of being a *copy in small*. Every model needs a referent but it is not quite clear in case of the memory model what that is. As an image of a memory, we are not to expect a faithful replica of an actual place. However, neither are we to assume that the model is born out of pure phantasy like a sand castle. This precarious ontology raises questions regarding the standards by which to judge a memory model.

*The Theme of 'Home'*

To study memory models systematically, an exemplary 'theme' is helpful. Such a theme can be a task that several model-makers work on and that allows results to be compared. Although in principal many objects of memory can be modelled, one that lends itself particularly well to a pilot project is that of the personal home. *"Memories of the outside world will never have the same tonality as those of home and, by recalling these memories, we add to our store of dreams"*, philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes in his *Poetics of Space* and ads that

> *[t]hanks to the house a great many of our memories are housed, and if the house is a bit elaborate, if it has a cellar and a garret, nooks and corridors, our memories have refuges that are all the more clearly delineated.* (Bachelard 1994, p.6,8)

In this vein, the *home* is chosen as an exemplary topic for the memory models to emerge in this project. Everyone has a home with associated memories. This makes it a rich and motivating resource. Besides that, homes are classical objects of model-making and thus provide plenty of opportunities for comparison. Eventually, the home is a fascinating topic in itself and it is expected that research into its autobiographical and social relevance can be supported by the new medium.

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[7] Noteworthy exceptions are Mike Kelly's *Educational Complex* (1995) [see *Part IIb: Models of Homes in Contemporary Art*, section *Models of Home*] and Roger Welch's *Memory Maps* (1973). Welch interviewed elderly people and simultaneously visualised reports of their childhood hometowns as drawings and wood models. However, Welch did not employ his own but other people's memories as a theme of reconstruction.

The thoughts outlined above form the practical and theoretical background of the proposed research project and raise the following questions:

- It might be theoretically adequate to express spatial memories in a spatial format but (how) will this work in practice?

- Does the attempt to make memory models yield significant results on a regular basis – considering the intricacies of model-making?

- How could anyone profit from making and apprehending memory models?

These are the questions to be pursued in the proposed project.

## Aims and Objectives

The **first aim** of the *Memory Model Project* is to critically assess the potential of model-making to *trigger* and *document* personal memories. The choice of home-related memories as an exemplary theme entails the **second aim**, which is to identify spatial and atmospheric features that people recall especially vividly when thinking of places they grew up in or homes they furnished for themselves but left. Both aims build on bringing together artists and academics to explore whether/how models are a suitable medium for the self-presentation, clarification and communication of autobiographical as well as culturally determined memories. This includes the following **objectives**:

- Assessment of models' potential to embody a subjective, phenomenal 'reality' as opposed to a verifiable referent

- Observation and description of the modelling process as an autobiographical practice and regarding its capacity to document and trigger memory details

- Observation and description of a potential interplay / supplementary function of models (static / spatial representations) and reports (dynamic / episodic representations) to mediate memories

- Identification of typical difficulties in the 'translation' of mental images into physical models

- Assessment of potentials for use in therapeutic contexts

- Observation of the relation between typical (culture and life-style-dependent) idea(l)s of a 'good' home and its idiosyncratic features

- Question wheather/how the individual experience of model-making relates to the reflection of social and political realities?

## Definitions

*Model.* The term *model* is ambiguous.[8] Here it will be used to describe three-dimensional artifacts that represent real or imaginary entities by emulating these entities' most salient or important features. What these salient or important features are is defined by the model-maker. Models usually render their referent in a different scale. The derivate term *scale-model* is, however, not fully adequate to describe memory models as the latter allow to size and distort objects according to their subjective experience whereas the former claim to reproduce the entire referent at an invariable scale. Another related term – *miniature* – will be treated here as describing a sub-category of the model. Other types of models can employ abstraction and tentative renderings whilst the term miniature is *"confined to those which might be said to be the result of a conscious effort to attain complete realism"* (Pattinson 1982, p.6). The discussion at hand follows architecture theorist Graham Pattinson in this distinction.

*Memory.* Memories are regarded here as strictly phenomenological entities.[9] As such, even a 'false' memory, that is a person's conviction that a certain object existed or event happened that in fact did not exist or happen (in the way s/he believes), counts as a memory. This entails that the term cannot be reduced to denote mental representation of a space or event formed during or shortly after its original experience. Instead it describes a subject's experience of places and events at the moment they are being recalled and accepting that they may have undergone representational changes. Following historian Annette Kuhn memory is thus understood as undercutting "*assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, taking it not as 'truth' but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined, for its meanings and its possibilities"* (Kuhn 2000, p.186).

*Home.* In the context of this research, *home* is understood primarily as the domestic space of a dwelling (house or flat) and one that is defined by a sense of belonging. This definition disregards broader geographical, historical, cultural, etc. notions such as *neighbourhood*, *hometown*, *nationality* or *ethnicity*. These notions are relevant here only in so far as they impact the physical space of a person's home.


## Mapping the Terrain

The definitions given above indicate the three major concepts of this project. These concepts form distinct functional realms [Fig.1]: The model acts as the *medium* to communicate. Memory acts as an idiosyncratic *filter and reservoir of information* through which the model-maker interprets the home.

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[8] Philosopher Nelson Goodman ascertains: *"Few terms are used in popular and scientific discourse more promiscuously than 'model'. A model is something to be admired or emulated, a pattern, a case in point, a type, a prototype, a specimen, a mock-up, a mathematical description – almost anything from a naked blonde to a quadratic equation – and may bear to what it models almost any relation of symbolization"* (Goodman 1968, p.171).

[9] For a summary of the *"Phenomenology of Memory from Husserl to Merleau-Ponty"* see Krell (1982).

The home is the model's *referent* (or *object*). Since the model is made in absence of the actual domestic space it depicts, this actual domestic space is the model's *secondary object* whereas its imagination is its *primary object*. All three functional realms have intersections. The representation of the home in memory is made meaningful as the 'stage setting' of autobiographical events; that is, it situates important episodes of a person's life. The 'representation of this representation' (the utterance of a memory as a model) bears formal similarity to, for example, architectural models and dollhouses. Personal memories are sometimes bound to models, as for instance when hobbyists reproduce a car they once owned or when people bring home miniatures of places they visited as souvenirs. This intersection can be neglected here and will not be discussed any further. The other two intersections – the relation between home and memory and between home and model – form important backgrounds for the intended research. The central topic of the investigation, however, concerns the overlap of all three functional realms (model, home, and memory). The project evolves around the overall possibility, material reality, and epistemological as well as practical merits of a *memory model* (of one's former home).
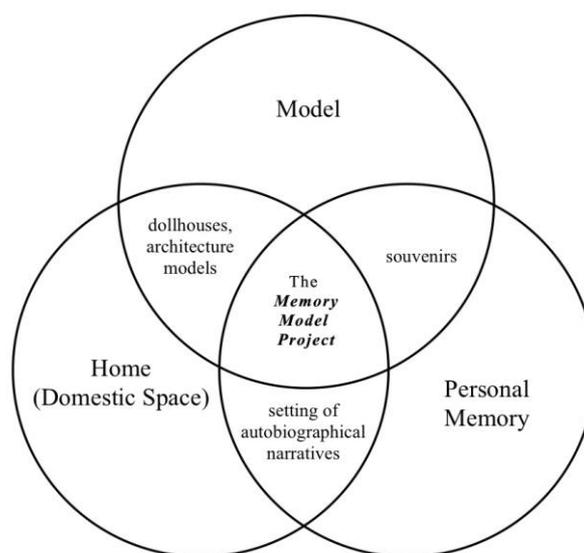


Fig. 1. Key concepts for the theory and practice of memory models

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