

Old houses are more alive than newly constructed ones: Housing and material memory in León, Guanajuato, Mexico

CARLOS RÍOS-LLAMAS

llamas@uabc.edu.mx

Universidad Autónoma de Baja California

ORCID ROR

DIEGO VÁZQUEZ VALLEJO

dgo.vazquez@hotmail.com

Independiente

ORCID ROR

ABSTRACT: The representation of material memory in housing is a sequence between architecture and society, in which spaces are supported by symbols. This article analyzes the relationship between materials and buildings based on the oral memories of its occupants. A qualitative methodology was developed to analyze the materiality of a historic neighborhood, recorded microhistories on-site, and photographic records. In the findings, social ideologies are amalgamated with housing construction based on the memories of the occupants' collective memory. Further, the material memory of housing goes beyond the idea of institutionalized heritage expressed in catalogs and lists to emphasize inherited social values reflected in everyday aspects of domestic life.

KEYWORDS: Collective memory; Heritage, Historic center.

Las casas viejas están más vivas que las nuevas: vivienda y memoria material en León, México

RESUMEN: La memoria material se expresa en la vivienda como una secuencia entre arquitectura y sociedad donde el espacio se sustenta en símbolos. El objetivo de este artículo es recuperar la relación que existe entre el orden de los edificios y los materiales que los mantienen en la memoria oral de sus habitantes. La metodología se basa en el análisis de materialidad de un barrio histórico, las microhistorias registradas in situ y la verificación en el archivo fotográfico. Los hallazgos expresan la construcción amalgamada de la vivienda con las ideologías sociales, a partir de los eventos que se fijaron en la memoria colectiva de los habitantes. Además de despejar la noción del patrimonio institucionalizado, que se enfoca en catálogos y listas de edificios por sus valores canónicos, la memoria material de la vivienda pone el acento en los valores sociales heredados que se plasman en lo ordinario de la vida doméstica.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Memoria colectiva; patrimonio; centro histórico.

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HOW TO QUOTE

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Introduction

They have all left the house, in reality, but actually they all have stayed. And it is not the memory of them that remains, but they themselves; and it is not that they remain at the house either, but that they continue through the house [...]The steps, the kisses, the forgiveness, and the crimes are gone. What continues through the house is the foot, the lips, the eyes, the heart. The negations and affirmations, the good and the evil have dispersed. What continues in the house, is the subject of the act.

César Vallejo

The material value of the architecture is represented in the territory as a vinculation between buildings and the social fabric, anchored to “places of memory” (Nora, 2008), whose political potential, at the same time, condenses the cultural manifestations and the identities located in a direct relationship with buildings and concrete places. Facing urbanism's mercantile tendencies, associated with the economic development, cultural manifestations that express their need for intangible and symbolic aspects, such as the memory of places and the sense of preservation of the built heritage, also stand out.

In Leon, a city that has experienced rapid growth, the real estate industry leveraged the dispossession of rural land and the housing commoditization in an accelerated process of urbanization in peripheral zones, which were given to central polygons and historical neighborhoods. According to census information, the population of León City grew from 867 920 citizens in 1990 to 1 721 215 in 2020, with an annual growth rate higher than 2% through 3 decades. As for the urban area, this one increased from 13 349 hectares (ha) in 1990 to 23 083 in 2020, but currently more than 30% of these are urban wastelands, with an extension of 5 484 ha, of which 1 365 are intra-urban wastelands located in the central outline, while about 4 000 ha of wastelands located in the secondary urban outline (Presidencia Municipal de León, 2021).

The focus of real estate policies and the development of the city towards the periphery has led to the neglect and abandonment of the historic neighborhoods, with the exception of the 24 central blocks, whose commercial vocation has guaranteed the

conservation of the buildings in this sense, the purpose of this article is to deepen the construction of collective memory regarding the concept of old neighborhood, historical housing and the materials of the space that was built on which the social fabric that gives meaning to heritage conservation is based. Integrated to the postulate that preserving the housing takes part not only in its acknowledgement as part of the heritage catalogs of institutions such as the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) but the ability of the agency of the inhabitant's natives of the neighborhood, expressed in neighborhood actions to keep and transform the buildings and public spaces.

Although it's true that collective memory is not a new approach to the transformation processes of historical zones, the abandonment process of central neighborhoods emphasizes the needs of the inhabitants of strengthening their memory practices, in an attempt to keep their cultural values facing the accelerated processes of urban transformation and forgetfulness of symbolic places. Speaking from sociological theories, the notion of agency refers to the individual capacity of facing social structures. While structures provide the guidelines that guide actions, agency is the capacity of each individual to choose and act accordingly.

Miller (1998, pp. 3-5) states that if this agency is deposited in the materials it can fall into fetishism by endowing the object with such influence, so he proposes the term of "material culture" as an alternative, that way "using the term of material culture, the results can be far less fetichists than many of the work that can't focus on the object". Following this approach, it can be said that the materiality of historic housing and the physical-cultural composition of the neighborhood do not exert a direct force on people, but on the structures that articulate social and urban dynamics.

Studies about cultural memory have been transforming from the idea of a manifestation of mystic origin, to one of analytical character that addresses the complexity of the social system. In this new perspective, Ingold (2011, p. 36) considers that "every material has inherent properties that can be expressed or suppressed in use (... and therefore) to describe the properties of materials is to tell the story of what happens as they flow, mix, and mutate." Ingold's focus on property materials can be observed since

the end of the 20th century on *The Perception of the Environment* (2011), where the ways humans relate to the environment were addressed, but which he embodies in a formal way in his book *Making* (2013), where he highlights the difference between thinking about objects and images or thinking about material flows and flows of consciousness. In this sense, materiality in housing does not refer to its physical composition in a single time slice, but to the transformation of materials over time and the way in which those changes settle in the memory of those who live among those materials.

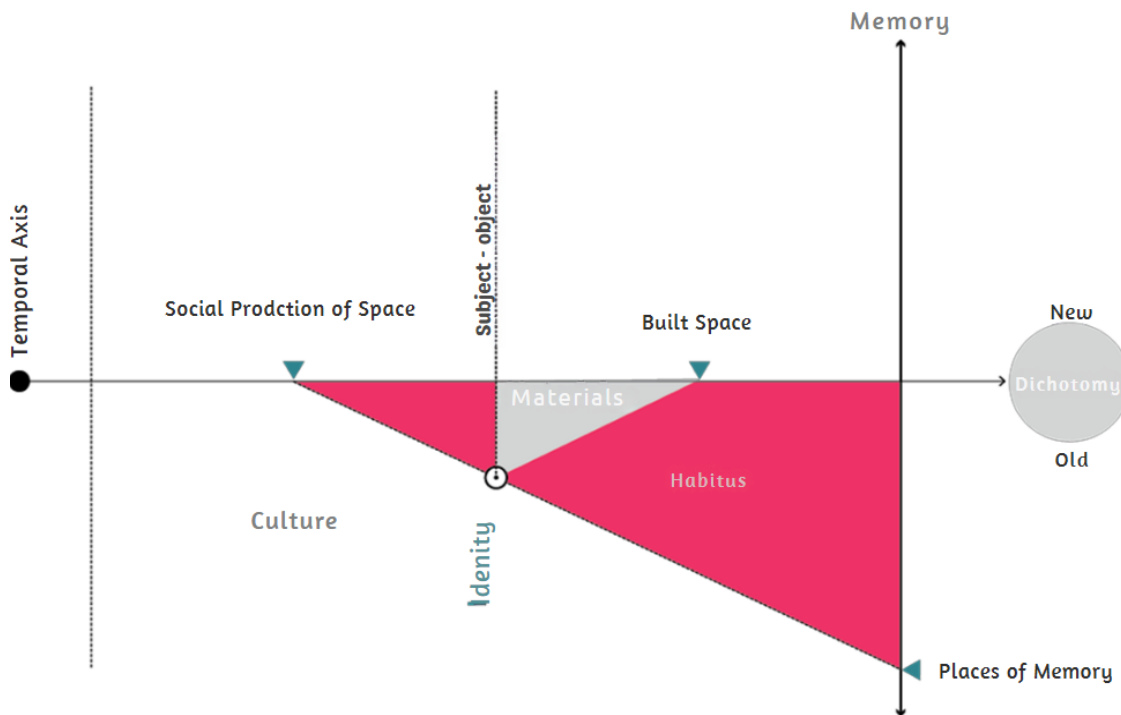
Regarding theories of memory, the first approach to the term “collective memory” is found in the work of Halbwachs (2002), in which he states that “each individual memory is a point of view on collective memory” and that “this point of view is transformed according to the place it occupies and this place changes according to the relationships it establishes with other social milieus” (Gimenez, 2016, p. 33). Therefore, it can be said that memories, both individual and collective, are structured by social frames that vary according to the particularities of each group and each place.

Based on these foundations, the study of the architectural urban environment invites us to discover the forms of memory within its places, both because of their common and daily use, as well as because they are spaces that hold a strong symbolism for the inhabitants. These forms of memory can be classified, according to Candau (2002), by their implications with family and social ties, because the forms and uses of genealogical memory are subject to historical and socio-cultural determinations through a vertical kinship consciousness –ascendancy– and another horizontal kinship consciousness –alliances–. This impact of memory with the sense of belonging is also associated with the principle of locality, which consists of the importance of rootedness to places, which is produced by the selection of elements that give meaning and coherence to the lineage and the trajectories between generations. In this way, the study of collective memory highlights the embodied dimension of place, as an effort to reveal the links of a particular place with those actors who are part of the social group that raises and transforms it.

The trajectory of the built space is positioned on a temporal axis, in the dichotomy of the new over the old. Since this direction is governed by official history, in heritage

records, dates, characters and images are prioritized before socio-spatial experiences and representations (Rios-Llamas, 2018). With the intention of proposing an alternative reading, this article aims to center on the use of materials as cultural agents, in order to redirect collective frames and places of memory towards the social foundations in which identities are formulated and heritage built from collective memory is claimed (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Identity and collective memory of materials.



Source: Outline of theoretical interpretation of housing and memory. Own elaboration 2020.

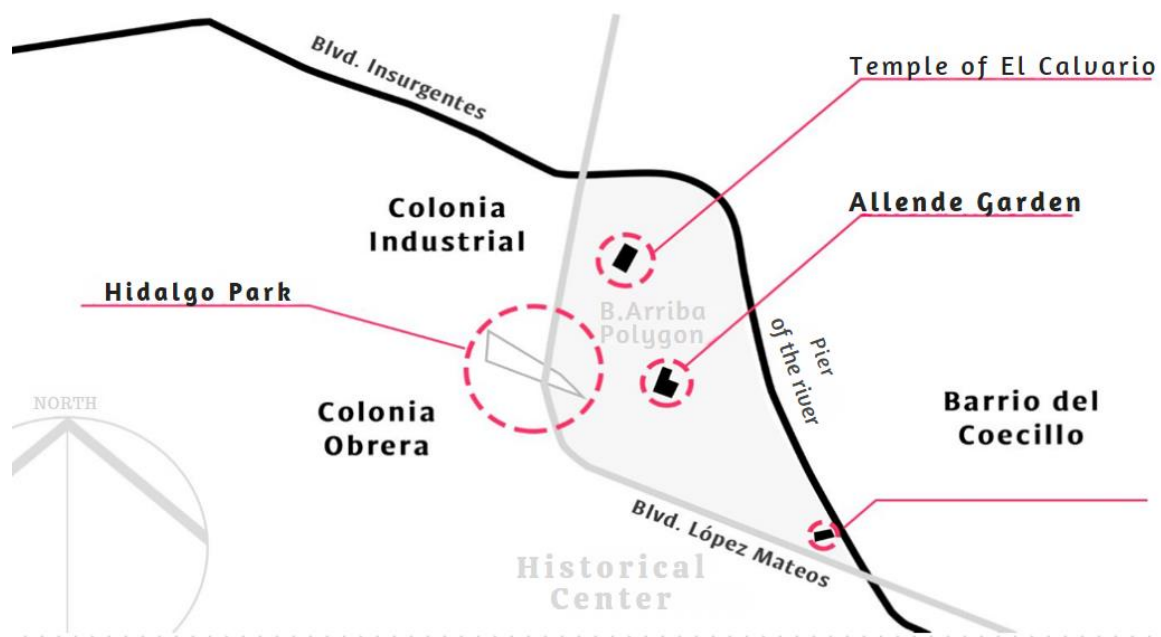
In the theoretical-conceptual approach of the study, the notion of *habitus* is associated with places of memory that locate identities and materials regarding the referents of the built space. The material definition of culture includes the socio-spatial processes that dynamically reconfigure it. Culture can be understood, then, as the set of signs, rules, models, attitudes and values from which social actors construct their collective identity and spatiality. Following Giménez (2007, pp. 196-197), “these cultural traits form a matrix of particular social identity [*ad intra*] and differentiation [*ad extra*] in such a manner that the sense that social actors have, neither as individuals nor as a group can’t be left

aside". However, the conception of culture through built space and places of memory goes beyond the cultural perspective of identities, and extends it in a double substantiation, connecting the systems of signs and social actors with the buildings' material support.

Methodology

The use of a method that has a qualitative approach makes it possible to inquire about the relationship established by the inhabitants with their environment built through memory. The study area was established as the polygon of *Barrio Arriba*, located to the north of the foundational polygon of the city of Leon. This polygon is bounded to the west and south by Adolfo Lopez Mateos Boulevard and to the north and east by the *Malecon del Río de los Gómez*, and includes three main neighborhoods: *El Duraznal* (to the north), Obregón (in the center) and De Santiago (at the southeast). Some of the most representative elements of *Barrio Arriba* are the temple of *El Calvario*, the *Allende garden* and *Hidalgo park* (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Contextualization of *Barrio Arriba*.



Source: Housing and memory contextualization map. Own elaboration based on images from Google Earth 2020.

The methodological procedure consists of two stages. The first one consists of documentary or archival research, and the second one corresponds to field data collection. For the documentary research, three secondary lines were covered, based on a historical interpretation, with the purpose of analyzing (1) the constructive evolution of *Barrio Arriba*, (2) its current materiality and (3) the criteria used by the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in relation to the cataloged buildings.

For the field research, the interview technique was used, with the intention of understanding the deep motives that individual agents have when acting with respect to social determinants. For the sample of the historic neighborhood, the stratified logic of primary, secondary and tertiary roads was followed: 27 de Septiembre Street, due to its recent intervention in the Pedestrian Route project; Limbo Street, which connects the neighborhood with López Mateos Boulevard; and Noriega Street, which establishes a transition from vehicular to pedestrian, culminating in the ascent to the *El Calvario* church. All of the cases investigated meet three characteristics: (1) the age of the (1) the informants must be over 50 years of age, (2) the period of life in the neighborhood must include childhood, and (3) the dwelling where they lived must have undergone modifications.

The interpretation of the data is based on a reconstruction of oral, spatial and graphic narratives. For the analysis of the material memory of the neighborhood, the narrative of the participants is taken as the main reference, in order to reestablish the link between individual and collective memory of those who share social ties in the temporal intersection and the specific nature of places (Nora, 2008, p. 21). The record of microhistories has provided a greater sensitivity to space memories.

The second resource for analysis is the object-subject relationship, through a hermeneutic exercise in which fragments allusive to *places of memory* are abstracted and translated into anchor figures for constructive materials. Finally, the photographic support of the three cases, represents the different applications of materials, the typologies and production conditions implicit in each of the roads taken as reference to analyze the neighborhood.

Results

Through the narrative of the inhabitants, the impact of the materials on the collective memory of those who contribute to the production of the space in the daily dynamics is highlighted. While it is true that the archive is the main reference for historical analysis, memory complements it to include cultural values. However, the collective memory presented in the documentary archive requires constant updating through comparison with the values imprinted in the cultural field and the *habitus*. Along these lines, the results of the research propose a constitution of the archive focused on material memory based on three main points:

1. The memory of the neighborhood and the oblivion of materials.
2. The material memory and the cataloged heritage.
3. The material memory of housing is a narrative of social structure.

The memory of the neighborhood and the oblivion of the materials

The establishment of Barrio Arriba set the tone for the official memory of the city of Leon, because the creation of a “city of tanners” relegated to oblivion the previous roots and links. Since its origin, as a result of the aggressions suffered by the first settlers after their arrival (16th century) by the indigenous groups of the then called *Valle de Señora* (currently the city of Leon), they requested the help of the viceregal authority to promote the establishment of a city that would serve as protection against the attacks and at the same time to facilitate the pacification of the native peoples.

On January 20, 1576, with more than fifty neighbors, of the one hundred requested, the title of villa was granted and later the title of city, in 1830. Years after the creation of the *Villa de Leon*, in 1597, the settler Juan Alonso de Torres requested before the Cabildo the purchase of the lot of Francisco Hernández to displace the mulattos and encourage the arrival of new residents. The request was justified by the bad reputation of sharing the same space with black people and mestizos. This decree meant the creation of the first neighborhood of the city, since then called *Barrio Arriba* or “*Barrio de arriba*” as a

differentiator from the "*Barrio de abajo*" (San Juan de Dios), which was granted to the mulattos, who dedicated themselves primarily to agriculture and cattle raising.

The routes of the mining industry favored the trade of products, so that by 1719 the census ordered by the viceroy Baltasar de Zuñiga y Guzman registered 36 factories dedicated to the tanning of skins. This conformation had *Barrio Arriba* as its main protagonist and the nascent working class community, who were identified as a low-income population. Closely related to the dynamics of the workers, the rootedness to the religious tradition, coming from the viceregal era and driving force of change in the built space with the construction of temples and chapels by popular initiative, also became important.

During the 19th century, the wars of Independence and Reform positioned Leon as a "city of refuge". At that time, León barely had more than 20,000 inhabitants and its population doubled during the first quarter of the century, in addition to the increase in the economy based on employment, a fundamental component in overcoming the economic crisis of that time. With the demographic increase, many of the migrants settled in *Barrio Arriba*, which could be considered as the stage of shaping the social structure, with the arrival of individuals from different parts of the country.

In *Barrio Arriba*, the construction of the temple of *El Calvario*, started in 1856 by Father Prudencio Castro, he had the objective of "raising a cross, emulating Mount Golgotha" (Monroy, 2019). Prudencio enlisted the help of seminarian José María de Yermo y Parres, and the inhabitants of the neighborhood participated in each stage of the construction. In addition, between 1870 and 1873, a permit was obtained to ask for alms in order to continue with the construction and to build an annex as an activity house. However, both projects were left unfinished when Father Prudencio died in 1885. Consequently, Father José María was left in charge and decided to dedicate the old house to charitable works, so he founded an asylum and the house of the Sisters of the Society of the Servants of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Poor (Figure 3).

Figure 3. View of the hill of *El Calvario* in the city of Leon.



Source: El Heraldo, April 19th 2019.

In order to link the built space and the social space, the construction of the temple of *El Calvario* is considered as an example of the symbols that have accompanied the processes of change in the neighborhood, because this complex maintains to this day a differential dynamic in regard to the sense of belonging and the rootedness of the manifestations of its inhabitants, in direct relation to the nucleus of *Barrio Arriba*. The contrast of geosymbolic components, such as *El Calvario*, with the later urban areas of the city of León, is linked to the material composition of the neighborhood, which was configured from the elevated topography to the multiplication of houses that walled off the religious center (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Aerial view of *El Calvario* and houses around the hill.



Source: Falcon, March 13, 2022.

The flood of 1888 violently affected the homes and families of León. According to the Memoirs of the Antonio Alzate Scientific Society, the city lost around twenty thousand inhabitants (Bonito León, 2017). The damage recorded was of two thousand houses destroyed; significant losses in the commercial sector and buildings, in addition to 242 deaths, two thousand missing and more than five thousand families in extreme poverty (Figure 6). There was also a considerable decrease in the 120,000 inhabitants registered before the flood, which would cause the city to lose its position as the second most

important city in the Mexican Republic in terms of population, territorial extension and industry (Navarro, 2010).

Figure 5. Effects of the flood of 1888.



Source: Bonito Leín, June 15th 2017.

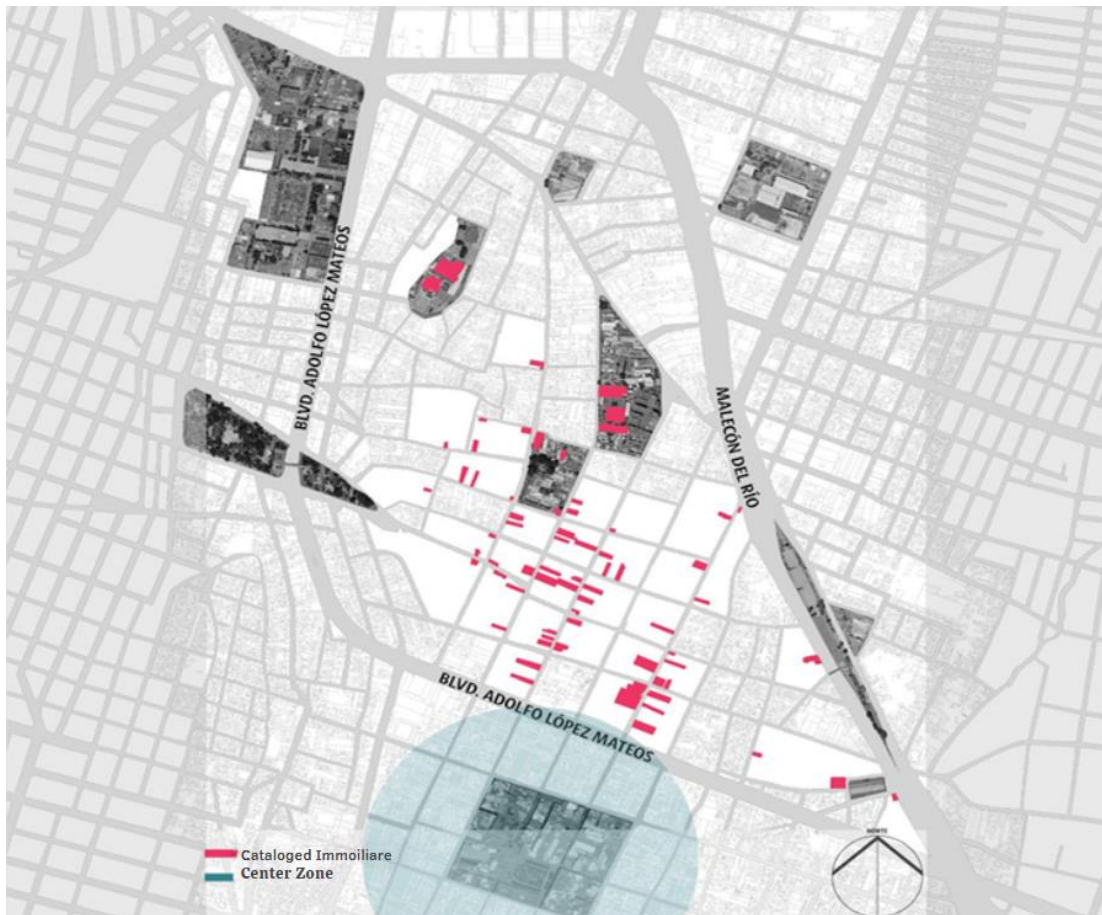
Floods have affected the city of León on repeated occasions, in such a way that they constitute a mark in the memory of different generations. The transformation implied by each flood, as direct and severe damage to the built space, can be seen as a point of physical, social, economic and therefore urban restructuring; however, the post-flood reconfigurations marked a series of inflections both in urban development and in the collective memory, imprinting on the history of León the idea of a city that could be read from disasters.

The materiality of memory recorded the floods through the adaptation of streets and buildings to deal with the emergency. For example, one result of the 1888 catastrophe was that *El Calvario* and the Sanctuary of Guadalupe became collection centers for the victims. As well as the settlement of some families on the eastern slope of the hill, which

due to its topographic conditions did not register major damages. The material losses opened the door to a new stage of consolidation. As a result of the reconstructions, *Barrio Arriba* presents a recovery of material elements that reflect the particular symbolism of a group, identified by the economic prosperity and consolidation of a way of life that maintains its foundations in acts of social and political segregation (Ramírez & Cordero, 2020). Nevertheless, it is thanks to its socio-cultural contrasts that it has been categorized as one of the most iconic neighborhoods in the history of the city.

The reconstruction also involved a social restructuring with the arrival of new members who intervened in the transformation of the built space and the ways in which the material culture of the neighborhood is produced. On the other hand, the expansion of the local tannery towards a national market boosted the development and consolidation of existing companies, as well as fostering the creation of family workshops in the leather and footwear sector. Under this context, workers became small entrepreneurs, significantly improved their income and formed a large middle class (IMPLAN, 2014).

This memory of the materials, in contrast to the oblivion due to the successive disasters suffered by the city of Leon, reinforces the complementarity between the archive and the memory. Faced with the binomial of memory and forgetting, the archive constitutes an element with a double function: on the one hand, the archive is the living memory (*mneme*), and on the other, the archive is also the act of remembering (*hypomnema*), in such a way that archiving is a way of facing the death of memories and, at the same time, archiving is storing memory (saving things) and writing history (saving information), so that memory can act in the face of forgetting (Guash, 2005, p. 158).

Figure 6. Map of cataloged properties.

Source: Map of listed properties based on information from IMPLAN's catalog of historic monuments. Own elaboration 2021.

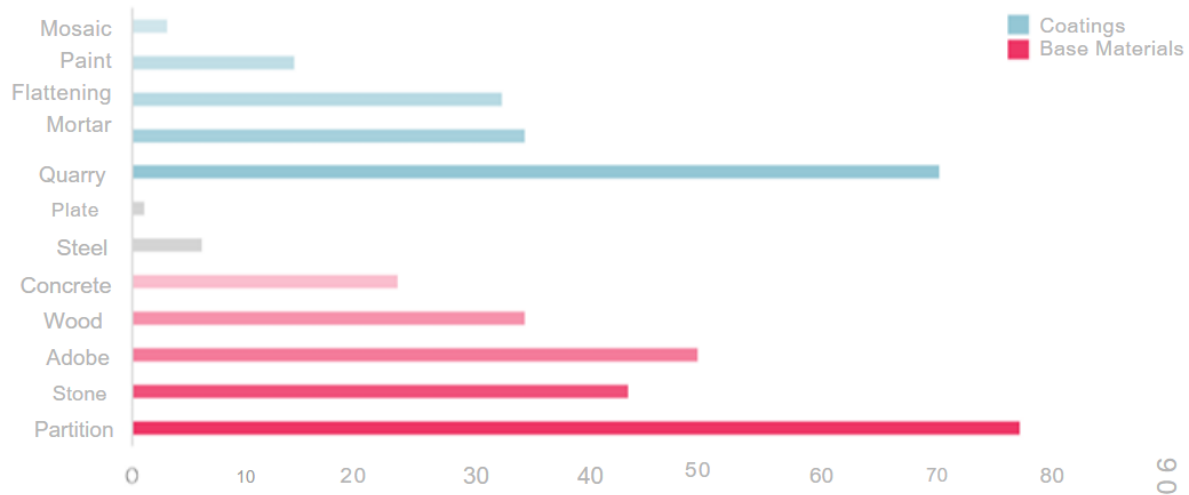
The material memory and the cataloged heritage

In reference to the review of the INAH Catalog of Historic Monuments, information was recovered for 82 properties within the polygon delimited as *Barrio Arriba*, including religious precincts, businesses and residential buildings from the 19th and 20th centuries (Figure 6). From this catalog, the main data considered were the materials present in the front and walls of the buildings, as well as the level of deterioration of each building regarding its materiality.

In the center of the polygon there are important differences in reference to the area of *El Calvario* and its surroundings. Of the total number of listed buildings, 57 are located on main streets and are buildings built during the 19th century. In the quantitative analysis

of the materials, there is a predominance of brick for the walls and mortar plaster on the front of the buildings (Figure 7).

Figure 7. List of materials in the buildings cataloged by INAH in *Barrio Arriba*.



Source: Falcon, June 22 2013.

It is important to question the role of materiality within the processes of heritage registration, because the INAH catalog gives greater relevance to the aesthetic characteristics and urban image, causing the material definition of the neighborhood to fall on the institutional historical value, which, when combined with regulations, tends to the museification of spaces. The heritage hierarchization of the construction materials leaves aside the local manufacture of the historical complex because it focuses on the construction elements of quarry and ironwork, while much of the manufacture of the houses of *Barrio Arriba* was given by the rural origin of the builders and their construction knowledge of artisanal character evidenced in mixtures of materials and structural solutions (Figure 8). In one of the interviews, Nicolasa states about a part of her house that “the room was built by Don Matilde, who was a neighbor around here. [...] but he made more houses around here [...] he also worked in another place. He came from the ranch” (personal communication, January, 2021).

Figure 8. Saint Martin's Cemetery and housing of Limbo street.

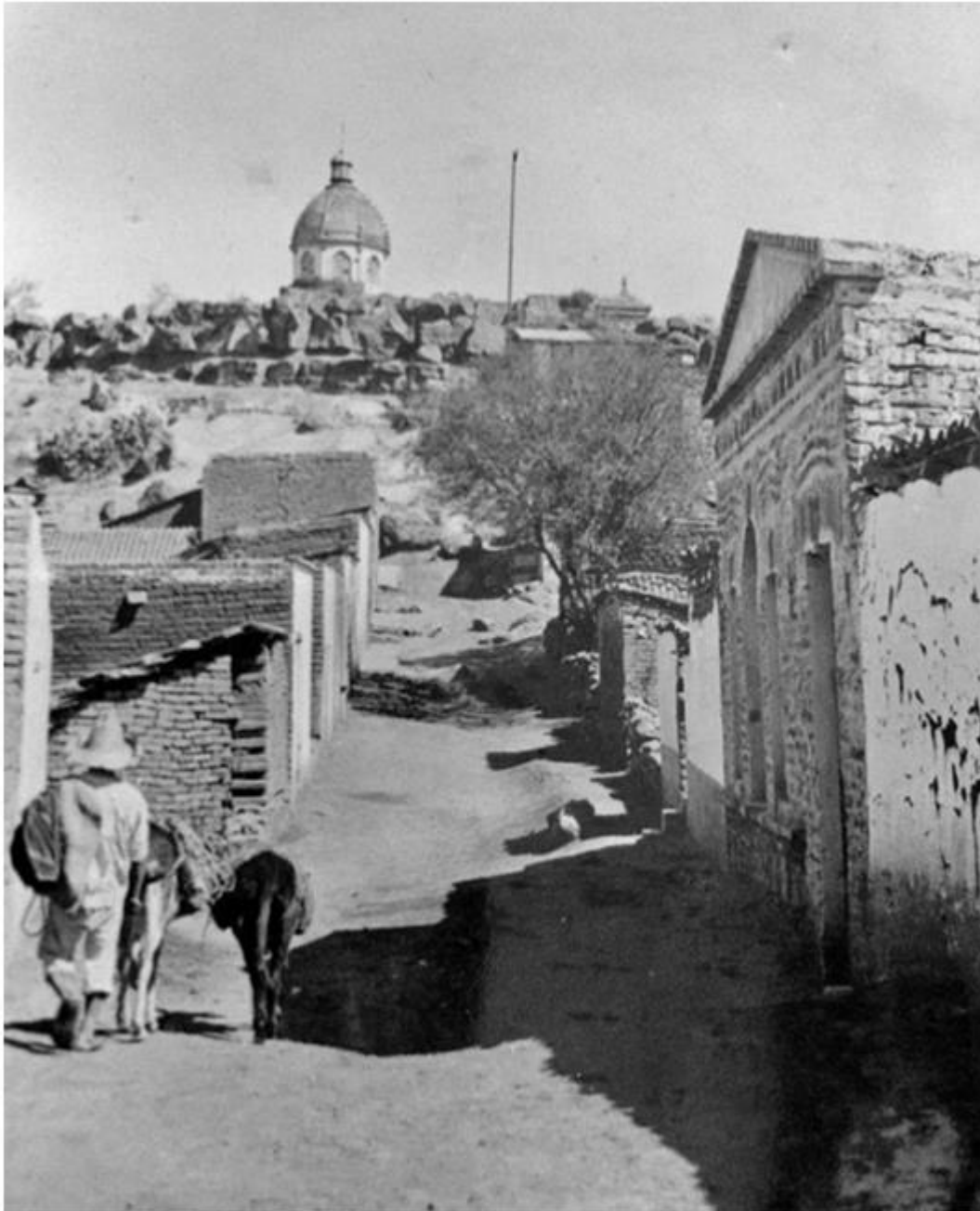


Source: Falcon, June 22 2013.

In this same sense, María Elena, from Noriega Street, considers that “before, it was all stone; everything was made with firewood and a few people lived like this, saying I have this or that” (personal communication, January 2021). The gradual changes in housing materials were articulated with wider changes in social processes, both at the family level and in the rural-urban transformations of the city of Leon (Figure 9). She considers that the adjustments in materiality have been both in the exterior and interior of the dwellings. She explains that

[Everything] changed because pavement was laid. Before, the whole street was made of stone, there were only rocks, it was a hill. That is to say, going down from the top, from El Calvario to the bottom [...] For example, to go up to El Calvario, the same people who lived on the street would make little holes like stairs. And that's how they climbed up; and there were rocks; and the people themselves were making their own paths. On this street, all the houses have been remodeled, none of them are the same as they were when I got married (personal communication, January 2021).

Figure 9. Picture on Norway street.



Source: *León Auténtico*, June 1st, 2022.

On the transformations of the house, Nicolasa, from Limbo Street, comments: Here the house changed in parts, little by little, because we had a pig pen along here [the kitchen] to raise the animals, back then it was the corral. There was a well [for water] up ahead, almost where the strainer is; later we used it as a bathroom. Here where the washing machine is, there was a mesquite [tree] and when the drainage system was built, they put

the bathroom there. There was the only room that was closed there. [...] Later a cousin of mine started to build here, but [the roof] was made of terracotta, but since the beam was breaking, they changed it (personal communication, January 2021).

The transformations in the materiality of the dwellings are also associated with the change of time, economic situation and cultural values. The improvements in family economies in the city of Leon with the arrival of industry were quickly reflected in housing materials (Figures 10, 11 and 12). As Victor, from *27 de Septiembre* Street, points out:

This house didn't have the same layout, so my dad started to build it little by little. [...] This floor is not the original one, it's a different one. It was a flooring of that style, pink. [...] The ceilings when I was there were without stilt, just like the mark of the wood with the cement. What is true is that before, much more material was used, or much better because the streets alone lasted a long time, now they don't, but before they did last a long time. And the doors were made of blacksmithing, besides, here there was a window box that my mother wanted to make because she liked plants a lot, [...] Also here my father put a little niche in the house with a virgin on top of it (personal communication, December 2020).

Figure 10. Inside of a housing on *27 de Septiembre* Street.



Source: Picture of a disturbing patio during a field job by Diego Vázquez (12/11/20).

Figure 11. Wooden door and marco de cantera. Housing 27 de Septiembre.



Source: Picture of a cover of a cantera by Diego Vázquez (22/10/20).

Figure 12. Ornamentation with plaster. Housing 27 de Septiembre.



Source: Photograph of plaster tyrol by Diego Vazquez (12/10/20).

In the face of constant transformations in the distribution and housing materials, the collective memory and the material memory of the neighborhood remain. The finishing materials can be covered, but if the structural aspects of the society are not changed, the memory is maintained, because maintaining the organization of spaces and the basic structure of the houses is a way of preserving the foundation of local societies through memories, regardless of whether the wall coverings are affected or the buildings are replaced. In this regard, Victoria explains:

No changes have been made to this house [...] The house is as it has been since we arrived. Since my parents have been living here, it has not been renovated [...] they just put in the plaster, it was stone and now they have put cement in it, they have whitewashed it. But all the houses were made of adobe... adobe and stone... because the modifications are not visible here. And the roof is made of *bovedilla*, the doors were made of wood. But now they

have been changed... because the window and the door were made of very old wood (personal communication, January 2021).

On her side, María Elena recalls that

[...] the fences were also made of stone. Well, I imagine that here it was like a little ranch, because all the fences were made of stone, all the corrals were connected, just little fences [...] they used to say things like that, that all the *trascorrales* were connected up to *El Calvario* (personal communication, January 2021).

In both narratives on housing, the indelible character of the materials in the memory of those who inhabited and still defend these spaces stands out. Despite the transformations that both dwellings have undergone over time and the intervention of builders, material memory activates a response against change and reinforces agency from small memories, to dictate what is valuable and enduring among the heirs of the neighborhood. Social structures can be modified by the practices and interactions between individuals, especially when these relationships occur from the prism of housing in material character, because the modification of the domestic space activates, by its capacity for agency, a series of transformations that escalate to the urban and societal.

The material memory of the dwelling is a narrative of the social structure

A dwelling and its inhabitants simultaneously traverse space and time. The trajectories of the domestic space merge with those of a family or a social nucleus, because the experiences of a household are traversed by the dynamism of physical spaces, the adaptability of the inhabitants and the constant adaptation of configurations, both of spaces and of family nuclei. It is enough to recover one of the trajectories to observe these resonances at the level of the whole neighborhood and social groups:

My grandfather was from a ranch. My mother [...] was born in 1924, At 19 years old, she moved into this house, when she got married; my grandfather went to work on the railroad in the north and brought my mother with him, [...] In my house we were eleven, seven men and four women, I am the ninth and my older sister [...]

So my grandfather arrived there at the "5 de Mayo", but that house is a little different from these ones, it also has a quarry front, in fact, it has an engraving on the entry that says "DF" which means Daniel Falcón, that was my grandfather's name [...] On the year my mother arrived, there were no houses around either, there were still very few. [...] The houses were spread out, maybe as they arrived they were built, or for example they improved their houses according to what was in fashion. What happens is that I feel that they are very differentiated communities, because we went to the neighborhood and my grandfather went to *La Santísima* and it is very related, meaning, they were like zones, as if they were configured by the temples [...] because my grandmother's house (maternal lineage) was not as nice, they had a tannery and they lived there; [...] it was made of brick, like a little ranch house: it had a brick floor and a lot of flowers (Victor, personal communication, December 2022).

Some streets in the neighborhood were named after the families who built houses there. The location of a house became a "geosymbol", understood as a territorial mark that becomes a reference for the community and is prolonged in history (Lopez, 2022). María Elena comments on her house on Noriega Street:

[...] I think it is more than eighty years old, [...] already a century old. It is one of the oldest houses, because my older brother is 75 [...] Here they called it Noriega because this was the first house here. I think it is already a hundred years old. Well, I think, from what I was talking about with my mother-in-law: there was that room and the roofing. The roofs were all made of tiles. They were all shacks [...] It was beautiful even when it rained because you could see the water falling from there like a waterfall, but it was all stone (personal communication, January 2021).

The material conditions of the neighborhood, including the streets, are also associated with the tactics to inhabit it, as well as the differences that, according to the social organization and the local inhabitants, in front of the social groups that are not familiar with the materiality of its streets and the way they behave in each season of the year. Nicolasa details, about Limbo Street:

At the beginning all those were corrals, you could tell them apart from here to the corner, they had their walls, but they were low. In the rainy season we used to go out into the streets to make fun of the people from outside who went down [because they slipped]. Here there was a stream running in the back, that is why we called it the little stream and it flowed into the place where the girl lived where she sold (personal communication, January 2021).

The construction of real-world mechanisms through collective memory has an embryonic function in extending the diversity of places to the structures of society. The most ordinary materials are the materials that define the position in society. Mario remembers, about Limbo house:

I am from 1957, [...] my parents worked as shoemakers, well my father was a shoemaker and my mother was a housewife, and my grandparents, I think they sold firewood, because at that time firewood was sold a lot. [...] And my grandparents, the other ones on my mother's side were from Jesús María, Jalisco (personal communication, January 2021).

The houses belong to a solidary group, individuals united in families, therefore, it is an architecture of the common good, which highlights the collectivity and the ordinary uses of the houses with vernacular techniques, from the collection of local materials for their construction. The importance of materials and constructive knowledge can be equated to formal and ornamental architectural elements, despite the fact that heritage institutions forget about local singularities in the domestic scale. The temporal texture of popular housing in historic neighborhoods corresponds to the expiration of the materials with which the neighborhood identity was configured.

Discussion

The preservation of architectural styles in historic housing is not a guarantee for maintaining the memory of a neighborhood. The plurality of materials and their applications do not structure, by themselves and in a mechanical way, the meaning of an inherited space such as the dwelling or the historic neighborhood. On the one hand,

architectural features can be replicated everywhere, repeating masonry systems, design forms, cladding colors and even the materials exposed without cladding. On the other hand, the collective memory is deployed on the basis of the material production conditions of the buildings, in such a way that the links are generated from the dwelling and the uses or practices that are written in the memory of each of the materials.

The national narrative of heritage has been written from glorious events and places. But there are other narratives that emerge from the recognition of ordinary spaces and domestic life. These are narratives of oral transmission that are often a protest against the social structures that conceal them. These two visions are instrumentalized by the political elites that intervene in the city, both in terms of heroic heritage and popular collective memory. Institutionalized heritage is supported by official history and catalogs. Collective memory requires recognition, because its main channel of transmission is orality, but associated with ordinary spaces it can be reinforced in the materiality of housing as an alternative evidence.

The processes in which a material is inscribed, from its state as raw material to the phase of deterioration, are the reflection of identity factors attributable to the strata and interactions in which society can be broken down. In *Barrio Arriba*, the wood, quarry or brick in the door or window openings of each of the houses are influenced by variables such as the ways of using a material or the economic condition of the inhabitants. In this sense, despite the fact that construction techniques are usually mass replicable, it is not by chance that these materials are used and not others. As a consequence, and in the face of the conservative tendency of historical heritage, it is understood that these materials can be maintained or not in their physical form, as long as the emphasis is placed on the cultural values inscribed in the memory that gives them meaning. In this logic, the discussion of the findings is put in dialogue with the theory on the basis of two main arguments: (1) material memory is another way of writing history and (2) collective memory as a support for housing.

Material memory is another way of writing history

Housing functions between the official history that protects it as an archive and the memory “producer of social practices” that are part of everyday life (Aguilar and Quintero, 2005). Considered as an archive, housing becomes a political instrument of memory. Although the archive, as a selective safeguard of what should not be forgotten, was widely questioned by Michel Foucault because history is usually told by the victors, as an alternative, memory persists in the vanquished and materializes in their ordinary spaces.

The materiality of the dwelling gives it its consistency as an archive, a storage device for cultural memory (Guash, 2005). In *Barrio Arriba*, the materials of the dwelling are at once the cultural traits of Leon and Guanajuato, determined by a religious political order that marked the social history of the neighborhood and that continues to determine the ideology of the entire Bajío territory (Martínez, 1997). As evidence, the social order of the neighborhood, and in general of the city of Leon, is reflected in the material memory of the homes of families of the economic elite, such as the house on *27 de Septiembre* street, while other families of rural origin are reflected in the houses on Limbo Street, as well as families that developed outside the priorities of urban planning and politics, such as the houses on Noriega Street.

The dwelling, considered as an archive, imprints a social and political regime that affirms the registry of knowledge and power relations. The preservation of housing in memory is selective, because there are a series of values that are defended and safeguarded while other elements are sent to oblivion. This process of safeguarding also has a political will that is established in the collectives, based on the discourses of places, constructions and materials that adhere better to the notion of *Barrio Arriba* and its buildings than to the rest of the historic neighborhoods of Leon. It can be affirmed that material memory puts the archive in tension with the subjects of a historical moment, because the visibility and permanence of certain materials and not others must be decided.

In the analysis of the three streets of *Barrio Arriba*, a dichotomy between the old and the new is evident. The transformations over the years are largely due to the vicissitudes of the natural and social environment that undergo changes: of use,

habitability, thermal and energy comfort or aesthetic and symbolic valuation. While the focus of heritage restoration may concentrate on reversing or avoiding changes, the material memory approach aims to break with the status of the dwelling as an architectural archive to be maintained in its physical constitution, in order to make way for the forms of representation of the building in the oral and graphic memory of the inhabitants.

The preservation of housing in historic neighborhoods requires a more direct approach to the local narratives that rest in the collective memory. This approach perceives memory as a support for identities and social meanings, thanks to its focus on ordinary forms of interaction (Aguilar and Quintero, 2005). Regarding heritage, the amplification of material memory opens up to the reintegration of properties cataloged as abandoned or in a state of serious deterioration within the social dynamics, which, if they cannot be rescued as objects, require tools to be rescued from memory, or to question whether these losses are the natural result of the need to forget, in a negotiation and direct dialogue between neighbors of *Barrio Arriba*, collectives of merchants and artisans, institutions and local governments.

On the other hand, the cultural policy of the city of Leon is eminently conservative and clerical. As a consequence, the history of the historic neighborhoods is wrapped between religious practices and the double political and ideological struggle of the moralizing elites that instituted the cultural values of the city. The commitments to the urban structure that guarantee the triumph of political parties also materialized in the synthesis of housing projects that reinforce the idea of a museum city around the largest scale roads or those in which clientelism with the families of business elites could be guaranteed. These families are the ones who make most of the decisions between the historical values of *Barrio Arriba* and the speculation of old houses that could increase their value by including them in the lists of built heritage made by the INAH.

However, memory is neither unique nor fixed, but is modulated by the tensions between the power groups that maintain and disseminate it. The political relations revealed in collective memory require the discovery and exposure of discourses, cultural practices, places, points of memory, and even silences and forgetfulness (Aguilar and

Quintero, 2005). The advantage of memory in housing consists in its double structuring and symbolic support, that is, as an ordinary construction of family narratives around the house and the family and, on the other hand, the transmission of these memories to organize the memory of daily life in historic neighborhoods.

Collective memory is the support of housing.

The historical conditions of *Barrio Arriba* have been studied favoring the formation of the official history through the compilation of public sources, but besides being ideologically opposed to the collective memory and its materiality, it can also be taken as a synthesizing phenomenon through which a reading of the processes carried out by a group of families of the dominant elite of the tanners was made. From the origin of *Barrio Arriba*, the segregation of blacks and mulattos was materialized in the construction of the physical space and the location of the houses with respect to economic activities and religion. Through the construction of houses in streets such as 27 de Septiembre, Limbo or Noriega, the social strata forged production ties, then also in groups faced catastrophes such as floods, which generated material and immaterial losses and a void in the memory of those who faced these events.

The links created through the material configuration of housing and its consolidation in the city gave rise to the production networks and interactions that structured the shared urban space. Since then, the inhabitants' interest in preserving material values has been their main means of resistance in the face of modifications to the urban image and changes in the functioning of housing in favor of the commercialization of *Barrio Arriba* to attract tourism and regenerate the economy.

Memory is the main constructive material of the housing. The materials with which the houses are built are not material objects, but "happen" in the material world that is composed of multiple compounds, each with reference to a system of cultural values that supports it. Houses do not function as isolated elements and their transformation depends on the will of multiple users whose decisions are materialized in each partition wall or stone.

The conditions of spatial heterogeneity in the three houses studied are perceptible both in the history and in the current context of the neighborhood despite the difficulties it presents, meaning, historically, memory overcomes adversity. But it is this condition that sustains the signaling towards the preservation of its heritage from a flexible instrument such as collective memory, therefore from the work carried out it is important to focus on strategies that allow the comprehensive incorporation of new dynamics demanded by the urban development of the city of Leon.

The complex approach to the materiality of memory in housing must go beyond the reading of materials as objects to study them from their own capacity to reconfigure cultural systems. It is necessary to contemplate natural and human conditioning factors and constructive processes for a more complete understanding of the productive process of a building (Vargas, 2013). Although from the historical line it is possible to recognize certain more symbolic aspects in the conditions of production of space within *Barrio Arriba*, the closest reference is the political-religious character on which the city was settled as an archive for a record that privileges civil and ecclesiastical buildings to the detriment of housing, even more so if they were homes of working families or from rural communities near the city of Leon.

Regarding the transformations of the built space, a large part of the housing has relied on forms of self-production, which allow residents to manage their resources and progressively carry out interventions that allow them to consolidate their heritage over time. Therefore, a second issue is self-production policies, especially regarding the coexistence of these policies with actions to preserve memory so that both favor the role of institutions, people and architects in these tasks. As Ríos (2018) states:

[...] memory has a greater link with the present and with the material anchoring of those memories, which constitutes not only the erection of spaces loaded with symbolic content, but the construction of a society from the places where its memory is embodied and remains (p.8).

Projects to improve historic areas, such as the subsequent interventions that have been carried out in *Barrio Arriba*, emphasize the construction of squares, the redesign of

roads, the pedestrianization of streets and the creation of new buildings. The failure of these projects lies in the fact that the remodeling of the physical space is not enough if it does not go hand in hand with a close understanding of the collective memory, and what is lost with the material transformations of the place. It is necessary to work with people and, as Ortiz says, “that they conceive themselves as close to their neighbors, respected and respectful of others and, definitely, that they consider themselves an integral part of the community and of the city where they live” (Ortiz, 2004, p.161).

Faced with the commodification of historic centers and real estate opportunism, historic housing faces a double challenge. On the one hand, there is the risk of its disappearance due to the change in the functioning of central urban areas that prioritize commerce as a primary activity; and on the other hand, heritage advocates often use official catalogs to “freeze” buildings in time and prevent them from being intervened or transformed. This second possibility is what is identified with the touristification and museification of the city and which, as Agamben (2013) rightly points out:

The museification of the world is today a fait accompli. One after the other, progressively, the spiritual powers that defined the life of men - art, religion, philosophy, the idea of nature, even politics - have withdrawn in a docile manner, one by one into the Museum [...] everything can become a Museum today, because this term names the exhibition of an impossibility to use, to inhabit, to make experience (p. 109).

Finally, the material experience of the dwelling passes first of all through the materiality of the inhabitant. Touch is the first channel of recognition and affirmation of the material memory of a house. Through touch a form is registered and confirmed in the mind of the subject (Hetherington, 2003). Sensoriality and materiality go hand in hand because touch constitutes the interface between the material world and the subjective world, between matter and its meaning or representations in the memory of the subject and the collective.

Conclusions

There are old houses without history because of the undervalue, arrogance and indifference of official archival records and historical heritage classification systems. There are also other narratives of housing. Other ways of reclaiming the cultural history of architecture, which are sustained by the oral transmission of housing and the most ordinary places such as the domestic space. The most underappreciated materials, such as earth, stone and bricks, are the ones that cemented the historic neighborhood for the most part, but they are also the materials that are written about the least, to concentrate the discourses of patrimonial history on marble, carved quarry and architectural styles imported by aristocrats and political elites. Nevertheless, the works of official history intersect with collective memory and construct a double discourse of built heritage: an archival historical narrative and a memorial narrative of orality.

With the need for memory also comes the need for oblivion, but the new does not replace the old, but integrates with it and at the same time the old persists. The new also gives opportunity to the unpublished and needs a component that sustains it on the temporal axis, that is why in the represented space images are considered as the main means of historic preservation. Addressing the preservation of heritage in self-built housing, not cataloged, is important for those who inhabit and live in a historic center, confined to discursive peripheries because their homes are not part of the “representative buildings”, as if the architectural icons were measured in the size of the work and the cost of its manufacture. Hence the urgency of a change of perspective among architects and institutions, to make the processes of recognition, visibility and intervention of historic neighborhoods more complex, in processes that take into account the feelings of the inhabitants and the discourses embodied in the material memory of their dwellings.

Material memory is the most impartial way to write the history of a neighborhood. The narratives of the houses associated with personal histories go beyond the events marked by history, which deepens the social gap between buildings and economic groups, because the chronicle of the city encompasses the record of isolated events, but in it there is no chronological follow-up of ordinary housing or historic neighborhoods. This does not

mean that as many narratives as possible should be recovered and stored, but rather that information should be recovered, beyond the pretensions of institutions and political actors, and that on the contrary, it evidences the interest of its inhabitants for the subsistence of the houses and the neighborhood. In this sense, the materials are recovered as figures that occur in the unfolding of the urban world and the social dynamics through the space and time of the city.

In the same way that the clay, in a façade ornamented with quarry figures representing religious motives, multiple factors have weight, both the economic possibility, as well as the religious roots and with this the particular history of the person, but also the particularities of the material, that is to say, the aptitudes that the quarry has compared to other materials to be carved or the artisan skills of the person who does the work, the aptitudes that the quarry has over other materials to be carved or the artisan skills of the person doing the work, and this at the same time has a direct relationship with the social nodes to which they belong, which depend on how long they have lived in the neighborhood and with whom they interact, which is due, for example, to the job they do or the places they travel, among other things. To such a degree that the possible links can be inexhaustible, since they belong to a complex and systematic network, however, the theoretical contribution that interests to develop is directed to this condition of reciprocity of the materials to their environment, or the exchange of direct and indirect conditioning factors that can be studied from a non-fetishist centralization of the materials.

It is necessary to understand the house from the power relations that are evidenced in it through each of the materials that are maintained and those that were substituted. This highlights that the aesthetic conditions are not external to other factors, but are closely related to the development of its inhabitants, contrary to the conception of elitist conservation of many defenders of built heritage, bastion of tradition and high culture that in the rescue of each masterpiece of civil and religious architecture gives way to a mass market with legal frameworks that are closer to speculation than to the defense of the collective and its cultural memory.

Regarding the materiality of memory as an archive, the critical positioning from the housing as an artifact in which memory is deposited is the possibility that opens each of the historic houses to question both the limits of the information that is held, and the limits of local power structures to manage buildings and urban spaces. The materiality of memory is, in short, an opportunity to de-objectify the dwelling and the neighborhood to rediscover them as an “event”, that is, each house is more than an object, it is an event, it is a way of telling history and a way of telling ourselves as a society inscribed in a given space/time.

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CARLOS RÍOS LLAMAS

Mexican. Architect and Doctor in Scientific-Social Studies from the Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente (ITESO). Research Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Design of the Autonomous University of Baja California. Experience in urban planning, housing policy design and direction of reports on urban violence prevention, both with the government and with agencies and organizations. Lines of research: spatial injustice, social inequalities in health, vulnerable corporealities, violence against women and informal settlements. Recent publications: Co-author in "Ordenamiento turístico comunitario: ruta crítica para definirlo" (2024) and in "Counterurbanization in the peri-urban forest of Guadalajara, Mexico" (2024).

DIEGO VÁZQUEZ VALLEJO

Mexican. Degree in architecture from Universidad La Salle Bajío (ULSB). Independent researcher. Experience in conceptualization and execution of housing projects at neighborhood scale. Line of research: interactions between the built environment and communities, from a multidisciplinary perspective. Recent publications: Co-author in "The materiality of housing and class order in León, Mexico" (2024).