Triangulating △2 — Written response

Rachel Whiteread's *House* (1993), commissioned by Artangel, was created from 193 Grove Road in Bow, one of the last remaining houses in a Victorian terrace undergoing demolition. Rather than preserving or reproducing the building, Whiteread used the existing house as a mould, casting its interior space in concrete before removing the external walls. What remained was therefore not a replica of the house but a solidification of the space that had once existed within it. Fireplaces, windows, doorways and other domestic details appeared in reverse across its surface, transforming previously inhabitable space into an inaccessible object.



Figure 1: Rachel Whiteread, House (1993). Photograph: Sue Ormerod

This inversion is central to my interest in the work. Whiteread does not attempt to reconstruct what has disappeared. Instead, she gives physical form to its absence. Doreen Massey describes how *House* disrupted conventional understandings of space and time because it "made present something which was absent" (Massey, 1995, p. 36). The empty volume in which everyday life had occurred became solid, while the architecture that once contained it disappeared. Absence was therefore not represented through an image of the lost house; the missing space itself became the work. The casting process also complicates the distinction between original and reproduction. Richard Shone suggests that a cast carries two histories; **"**its own past and the past of the object it replicates**"** (Shone, 1995, p. 52). In *House*, these histories become inseparable. The sculpture is materially new, yet every indentation on its surface depends upon contact with an architecture that no longer exists. It simultaneously evidences the former building and announces its disappearance. Time is therefore embedded within *House* as much as space. The original building was already condemned, while Whiteread's sculpture itself existed for only a few months before being demolished in January 1994. Lingwood argues that the meaning of *House* emerged as much from its particular configuration of time, location and surrounding political circumstances as from its physical appearance (Lingwood, 1995, pp. 6–11). He ultimately insists that the work could not be separated from the place in which it existed. *House* therefore occupied an unstable position between preservation and disappearance; it made a disappearing place momentarily present without attempting to permanently prevent its loss. This temporal dimension is particularly visible in John Davies's photographic essay in the *House* publication, which follows the site from construction, through the sculpture's existence, to its eventual disappearance (Davies, 1995, pp.

73–95). Rather than treating *House* as a single static object, this sequence situates it within an ongoing transformation of the site.



Figure 2: Rachel Whiteread's House nearing completion (1993). John Davies

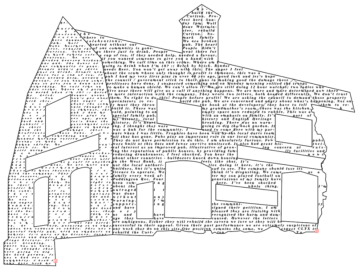


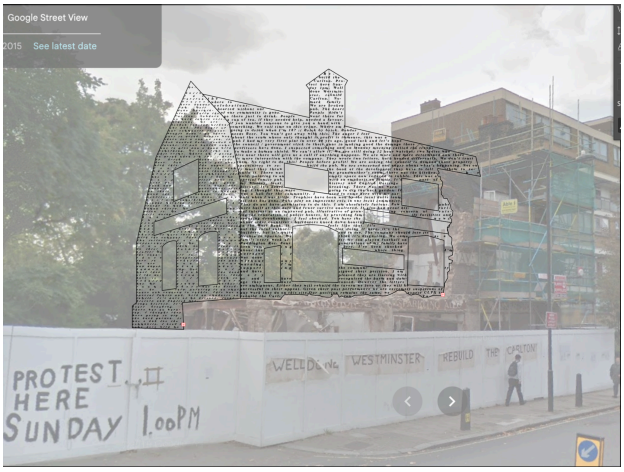
Figure 3: Demolition (1994). Stephen White

The meaning of *House*, however, was not determined by Whiteread alone. Once completed, it became the focus of intense public disagreement. Its reception ranged from acclaim within the art world to hostility from local politicians, while opinion amongst residents was also divided. While some locals thanked Whiteread for making their memories tangible, others questioned the sculpture's presence on the site. This disagreement was perhaps most directly captured by the graffiti "WOT FOR?" painted onto the work, later answered with "WHY NOT?"; a brief exchange that turned the sculpture itself into a surface for the public debate surrounding its meaning and legitimacy. Lingwood argued that this disagreement could not be reduced to a simple opposition between an art establishment and a local community; disagreement existed within both. The instability of the work's meaning therefore became part of the work itself.This reception complicates what it means to visualise absence. *House* did not merely refer to something that had disappeared. By materialising that disappearance, it produced a new presence on the site and generated new questions around whose memories were being preserved, who could speak for a place and who could determine whether that representation should remain. Its own demolition intensified this contradiction; an artwork made to materialise a disappearing house subsequently disappeared as well.

My current enquiry approaches these questions from an almost opposite position. I have been researching the Carlton Tavern in Maida Vale, a pub illegally demolished in 2015 and later reconstructed in facsimile on the same site. I initially approached the Carlton through the less immediately visible information through which a place acquires meaning; through memory, attachment, testimony and community. The facsimile reconstruction, however, has led me to question this more specifically. Where *House* makes the disappearance of the original building physically legible, the rebuilt Carlton attempts to restore architectural continuity after that continuity has already been broken. The distinction is not simply one of 'original and copy'. The reconstructed Carlton is a functioning place rather than a representation of one. People drink

there, meet there and generate new experiences within it. Its architectural resemblance to the previous pub nevertheless raises questions about what the facsimile is attempting to restore. Is sameness primarily concerned with material authenticity, or can familiar architecture provide a framework through which memories, routines and relationships are able to continue? The reconstruction might therefore be understood not only as a reproduction of the former building but as an attempt to reconnect two periods in the Carlton's existence across a moment of rupture.This places it in tension with Whiteread's position. *House* refuses to disguise disappearance; the cast transforms absence into its principal subject. The Carlton instead returns the lost architecture to everyday use, making its interruption less immediately legible.In this sense, Whiteread materialises absence, while the Carlton appears to materialise continuity. Yet these positions are not necessarily opposites. I have begun to consider whether absence can persist within reconstruction, and whether a place can appear materially complete while still carrying traces of what is no longer there. This line of enquiry has also made me reconsider my own graphic experiments. In one test, I used an image of the demolished Carlton and filled the missing silhouette of the building with testimonies gathered from people who had spoken publicly about its loss.





Initially, I understood this as a way of reconstructing the absent pub through the voices of its community. Encountering *House*, however, has made me question the assumption that absence needs to be reconstructed at all. If Whiteread's work allows absence itself to carry information, filling the Carlton's empty silhouette may risk resolving something that might be more productive if it remains incomplete. A subsequent experiment used photographs of the rebuilt Carlton overlaid with questions about what could and could not be understood through observation alone. Rather than filling the architecture with answers, these questions exposed gaps in my own access to the place; memories I do not possess, histories I did not experience and relationships that cannot be immediately read from the reconstructed building. My attempts to speak with former users of the pub have so far also remained uncertain. I do not consider this evidence that its community or memories have disappeared; instead, it has made me more conscious of the limits of my own position within the research.



Whiteread therefore shifts my role as a graphic communicator. Rather than attempting to produce a complete representation of the Carlton, I am becoming interested in how graphic communication might register what cannot be completely recovered, accessed or represented. Testimony, archival material, unanswered questions and gaps in information do not necessarily need to form a coherent replacement for what was lost. They might instead operate as partial traces of an interrupted history. This also changes how I understand time within the Carlton. Its facsimile connects two versions of the same place; the pub before demolition and the pub after reconstruction. Yet between them exists another condition; demolition, campaigning and physical absence. Architectural reconstruction may visually reconnect the two ends of this timeline without removing what occurred between them.

Rather than concluding that the reconstructed Carlton either preserves or erases its past, I want to remain open to the possibility that both may occur simultaneously. Familiar architecture may sustain routines, relationships and memories while making its material rupture less immediately visible. *House* has therefore moved my inquiry away from simply asking what intangible information is embedded within a place and towards questions of presence, absence, and the space in between. This opens a new temporarily unclear direction for my studio practice, in which I can begin to test how the Carlton's interrupted history might remain perceptible without attempting to reconstruct it into a complete narrative. What might it mean to represent the space between presence and absence?