

A landscape photograph of a stone building in a green valley with a massive flock of birds flying overhead. The scene is captured in a wide-angle shot, showing a stone building with three chimneys in the foreground, a dirt path leading to it, and a small stream. The background features rolling green hills and a large, grey mountain peak under a sky filled with hundreds of birds in flight. The overall atmosphere is one of a wild, natural environment.

intimate spaces and feathers

or
how the designing
of the present can
be an attempt to
redesign the past

intimate spaces and feathers

An essay on the project
"House Full of Feathers",
which was processed within
Studio II - House of Phobia

Theory tutor

Anne Hoogewoning

Studio tutor

Nasim Razavian

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Something significantly odd happened two days ago; I received a letter from my current client, Mr Craig, which I attach to the page following this text. First of all, I am speaking about an actual letter that came by post, but that wasn't the weirdest part. He wrote in order to confess an untold story defining his past and to subtly ask me to do something I could never dare to imagine: to design the house of phobia.

If I had to name it, I would say that Mr Craig suffers from a certain level of ornithophobia, which is the word describing the fear of birds. It is categorised as a specific phobia, since it describes a lasting and unreasonable fear, caused by the presence, or thought of a specific object or situation that usually poses little or no actual danger.¹ I'm saying 'in a certain level' because my client's subject of fear is specifically the common raven (*Corvus corax*). It's not that he finds them disgusting or grisly, neither he has heavy anxiety attack symptoms; it's rather a deeper, more complex issue that derives from a frightful event of his childhood.

In his book *On Collective Memory*, French philosopher and sociologist Maurice Halbwach mentions that "the mind reconstructs one's memories, under the pressure of one's society".² Therefore what interests me in this case is the broad, multi-layered range of incidents and narratives -spotted in both individual and collective subconscious- that may have contributed to the development of my client's irrational fear.



the past



Image1. Illustration from an 18th-century Icelandic manuscript depicting the two ravens, Huginn and Muninn, sitting on the shoulders of Odin.

Crows and ravens are scavengers and carrion eaters, thus from the ancient times they have been establishing their presence in battlefields, medieval hospitals, execution sites and cemeteries.³ This fact, in combination with their black plumage and croaking call, led in them being associated with loss and ill omen.⁴

From Aesopus to Brothers Grimm, many tales have been written, not only about crow's and raven's sharpness of mind and wisdom, but also about their dark and eerie appearance. There are folklore stories where witches transform into ravens or where a person takes the form of a raven as a punishment. In addition, some Celtic tales suggest that King Arthur himself was turned into a raven upon his death.⁵

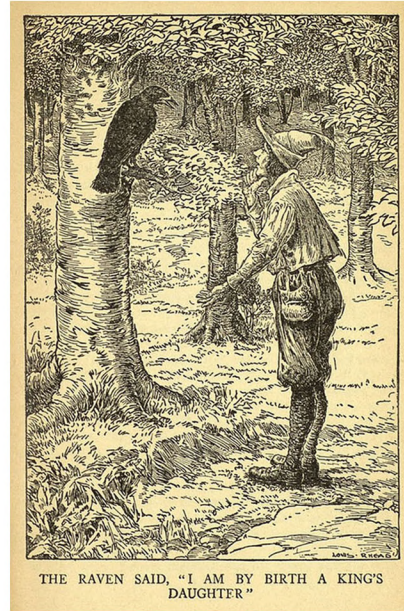


Image2. Grimm's Fairy Tales, Stories and Tales of Elves, Goblins, and Fairies, with many illustrations and decorations by Louis Rhead, was published by Books Inc., New York 1917.

Mr Craig grew up in the 70's, spending most of his summers as a child with his grandmother at Glencoe village, in Scottish Highlands. During bedtime he used to hear stories about local legends and myths which, tangled up with fantasy, have composed some of the most famous timeless tales that are still being told nowadays.

By reading the attached letter, one can easily understand how a frightful encounter with a dead raven was additionally weaved with several symbolisms and connotations into a ten-year-old child's mind. The incident itself, blended with the aforementioned tails, created an intense experience that changed my client's perception of well-being, making it more fragile and unstable; thus, formed a trauma.⁶



Image3. Visual development of the Raven from Disney’s “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” (1937)

The location of the project, including its numerous species, clearly constitutes the primal scenery of Mr Craig’s fear. Therefore, I believe that his decision of going back and renovate this old cottage, is a bold gesture towards not only his redefinition of his relation to the ravens, but also to his reconciliation with the place and, in the end, with his own identity.

According to Pierre Janet, a pioneering French psychologist, philosopher and psychotherapist in the field of dissociation and traumatic memory, normal memory consists of two sets of action: (1) the actions during the event itself, and (2) an account of the event that symbolizes the past actions that followed.⁷ Through Mr Craig’s letter it is clear that not only the event itself was shaking for his child-self, but also the night and the day after that, as well as his feeling that something had changed ever since. It required for several years to pass in order for him to face such experience as it was, and that’s because ‘traumatic memories must be transformed into narratives, by gradually realizing and integrating the trauma as a past event in one’s autobiography’.⁸

It is obvious that the challenge I have to deal with now on, as the architect of the project, became much bigger; is the designing of an intimate space into the scenery of phobia capable of reducing one’s fear, helping them reconcile with the environment and even deal with issues of identity and trauma? And if so, which should be the designer’s spatial vocabulary?



the present

Back in the summer of 1974, when the frightful incident took place, what surely changed for my client was his own perception of his grandmother's house; his intimacy along with his sense of safety fell apart. The psychological connection with space, and its fragility, is what constitutes the point of focus on my design research.

While a house refers to a building, a physical construction, in which someone lives, a home can refer either to a building or to any location that a person thinks of as the special place where they feel most comfortable.⁹

According to architectural theorist and professor Teresa Stoppani, "architecture is not only a container, a supporter, but a product of life; architecture is also a cultural and symbolic production, always invested with political and ideological meanings that reflect those of the society it hosts and represents. Architecture changes with life and culture; in this sense, it lives".¹⁰ Consequently, the living domestic space adapts to its users' life habits and changes. One's perception of space transforms through time, according to their psychology, confirming that architecture is a dynamic process which "possesses a story of change, of variation, of adjustments in time".¹¹

Inside the spectrum of changes in one's life, when it comes to trauma and its connection to domestic space, the intimate feeling of being home will probably get interrupted. Mr Craig mentions in his letter that the night following to the incident was even scarier; for his grandmother's house was the place where he, as a child, had heard all the tales and myths that

wove his fear through the years. Yet, that specific night, the same house became the place where he first started to notice all the uncommon and spooky nocturnal sounds of the surrounding environment.

As professor and science historian Ruth Leys has stated, "the experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful, dissociated, traumatic present".¹² Therefore, one can easily deduce that Mr Craig has experienced multiple revivals of that night, each one of the times he revisited this old cottage. In the end, the warm and welcoming home of his childhood became the cold and unsafe house that hosted the dawning of his phobia.

...

Today, my client's wish is to be exposed to the subject of his fear, the ravens, in order not only to overcome it, but also to eventually come close to it. For this purpose, I suggest that the final design should be an open-plan space with visual openings towards the sky and the surroundings, inviting the nature to gradually come in.

I would additionally suggest the creation of a symbolic connection between the past and the present, so that a retrieval of lost intimacy with both the location and the house becomes achievable. This is why I am planning to maintain the surrounding old walls and place the newly designed house in the middle. Along these lines, Mr Craig will be able to remember and reflect on the past by living inside its ruin, which will now be forming a familiar, protective shell that gently enfolds the present.



the future

Nevertheless, Mr Craig will need to find his own pace, towards the building of a connection with the ravens, and for this purpose, the key word is time. A Scotch Elm tree, planted in the middle of the enclosed yard, will provide the time frame of the reconciliation process; at the beginning, ravens may come, attracted by the insects, the flowers, and the seeds of the tree, but slowly they will get familiar with the place and the human presence. It all depends on the little gestures Mr Craig might do in order to keep them close, providing water, food, or plants for their nutrition. As the years will go by, the tree will grow, and the birds will keep coming, individually or in flocks, to build their nests, maintaining the relationship.

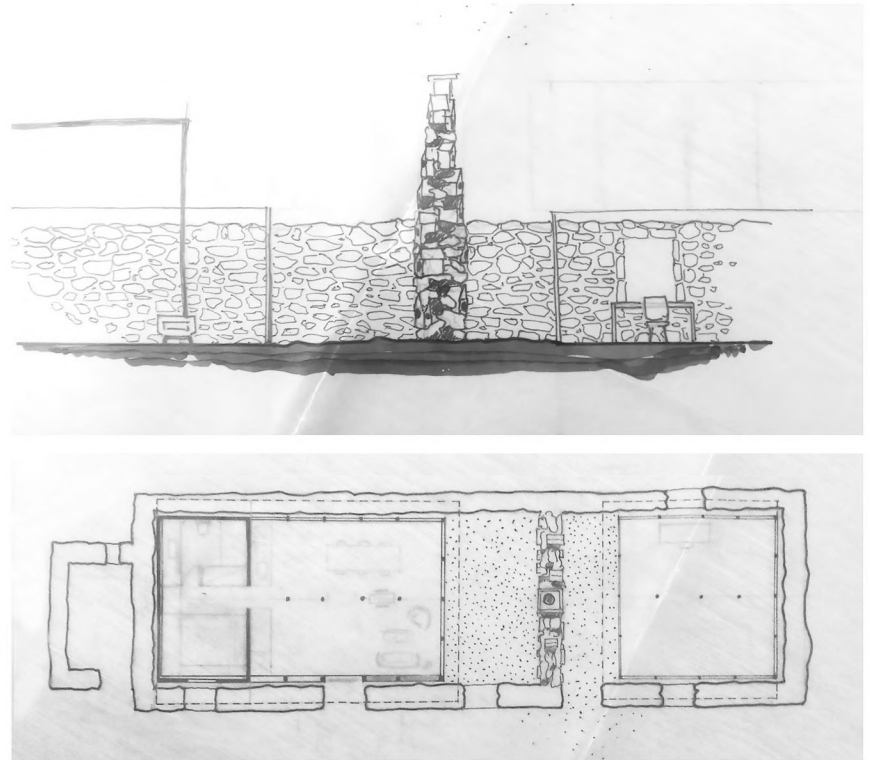


Image4. First hand drawings. Section and plan.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Specific phobia definition by National Institute of Mental Health
- ² Maurice Halbwachs, On Collective Memory, pg.51
- ³ A Murder of Crows, September 2010, online article on Aves Noir blog page: <https://avesnoir.com/a-murder-of-crows>
- ⁴ Cultural depictions of ravens, Wikipedia page: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_depictions_of_ravens
- ⁵ Ravens in Celtic Mythology, March 2010, online article on Aves Noir blog page: <https://avesnoir.com/ravens-in-celtic-mythology>
- ⁶ Giulio Perrotta, 2019, Psychological Trauma: Definition, Clinical Contexts, Neural Correlations and Therapeutic Approaches Recent Discoveries
- ⁷ Pierre Janet, 1928a, L'évolution de la mémoire et de la notion du temps [The evolution of memory and the notion of time]. Paris: A Chahine
- ⁸ Pierre Janet, 1928a
- ⁹ The Britannica Dictionary definition
- ¹⁰ Teresa Stoppani, 2016, Architecture and Trauma
- ¹¹ Teresa Stoppani, 2016
- ¹² Ruth Leys, 2000, Trauma – A Genealogy

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IMAGE SOURCES

Image1. Cultural Depictions of ravens, Wikipedia website

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_depictions_of_ravens#/media/File:Manuscript_Odinn.jpg

Image2. Grimm's Fairy Tales and Tales of Elves, Goblins, and Fairies

(New York: Harper and brothers, 1917) <https://vintageillustrators.weebly.com/grimms-fairy-tales.html>

Image3. Walt Disney Animation Studios official twitter page

<https://twitter.com/disneyanimation/status/925476390199164928>

Image4. First hand drawings of the project. Personal archive.

Image of the cover. Tigh-na-sleubhaich (House of the Mountains, in Scottish Gaelic), The Spokesman Review article: In the Scottish Highlands, a hiking dream fulfilled

<https://www.spokesman.com/stories/2021/oct/23/in-the-scottish-highlands-a-hiking-dream-fulfilled/>

Image pg. 03-04. Glencoe village in 1970, photographed by Hugh Mc-

Creadie. Found in Flickr: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/podkin/14076410745/in/photostream/>

Image pg. 11-12. Still from the movie "A single man", 2009, by Tom Ford,

from which I got inspired for my client's character

Image pg. 15-16. Digital drawing of the final design. Personal

archive.



Athina Botonaki
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