Speaking of Memory …

Linda Sandino

Oral history and interview-based research has increasingly become the method *du jour* for all sorts of publications, from the popular to the academic, from the celebrity profile to the scholarly interview. With the rise of the interview the Q&A is now the definitive writing form, covering everything from the trivial and anecdotal to in-depth revelations about working methods in almost any creative practice, and has contributed to what sociologists Paul Atkinson and David Silverman have coined 'the interview society'. Listening to others speak about the past is now seen as providing direct, unmediated contact with history. After the upsurge of interest in heritage, memory has taken centre-stage. More flexible politically and ideologically (as well as economically), it serves as a catch-all trope for the past, for history, for community and for individualism. In the arts, of course, the interview has always been a favourite means for gaining access to 'meaning', a way for practitioners to explain the underlying rationale of their work. The author may have passed on, but the orator is alive and well.

Witness descriptions have a long historical tradition. In the fifth century BC Thucydides drew on the accounts of eye-witnesses for his own history of the Peloponnesian Wars. But what really triggered the expansion of oral history as a discipline was the development of audio tape, employed most notably by Allan Nevins, who established the Columbia University Oral History Research Office in 1948, and with this transformed the portable tape recorder into a historical research tool. This model of research was in turn absorbed into the UK from the 1960s onwards, with social historians, in particular, using audio recordings to empower marginalised voices and uncover a 'history from below'. Apart from their absorption into the writings of British historians like Asa Briggs and John Saville, interviews are now increasingly to be found in oral history archives, especially those focusing on the arts. For example, the Archives of American Art and the Chicago Architects Oral History project provide substantial records of both major and less well-known figures from art and architecture, as does National Life Stories at the British Library, which includes the Architects' Lives collection, while the privately run Pidgeon Digital draws on interviews conducted by Monica Pidgeon, the former editor of *Architectural Design*, who began her recordings in 1979 'so as to be able to hear the actual voices of the designers of buildings and listen to their ideas'.

The profusion of archives is one factor in the legitimisation of oral history. Another is its use in academic research as both a resource and a topic: as a means of gathering data and understanding how communities and individuals are constructed by what they say and how they say it. As an E M Forster character claims so succinctly, 'How can I tell what I think, until I see what I say?' While interviews offer first-hand accounts akin to witness statements, these documents provide insights not just into past events but into the history of thinking. In their introduction to the *Oral History Reader*, Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson define oral history as 'the interviewing of eye-witness participants in the events of the past for the purposes of historical reconstruction'. But can the past ever be reconstructed, or is not more appropriate to think of the past as *re*-presented? The former aims at a verifiable realism; the latter admits to a creative, imaginative dimension because 'history-telling', as the great oral historian Alessandro Portelli has defined it, is a specific form of talking about the past – 'a form of verbal art generated by the cultural and personal encounter in the context of fieldwork'.

In the arts, the biographical and monographic approach has also helped to sustain the aura of the grand practitioner. Great narratives of self-justification can pour out, while the interviewer is left to oscillate between admiration and scepticism – the latter often only emerging on playing back the material. Since all interviews are based on a personal exchange, they are also always accompanied by a sense of the uniqueness of the moment or of the encounter. Not only are we recording experience, but as interviewers we are participating in an experience ourselves. For this experience to be complete, however, interviewers need to ensure that interviewees are able to tell their histories as fully as possible – subsequent readings of their accounts are a mixture of demystification and restoration, with an ear for the unsaid as much as the spoken. The result may be as much fictive as it is historical, but as the philosopher Paul Ricoeur has argued, history and fiction are the two 'great modes' of western narrative, interwoven rather than separate.

The texts themselves also come to us in various forms, not just dialogue. The Q&A format parodies the consumer survey questionnaire although its origin lies in the religious catechism, for which the form provided the vehicle for ideologic-al induction – 'Who made the world? God made the world. Who is God?' – with an emphasis on certainty and the definitive statement. The format was brilliantly exploited in the 1970s by Andy Warhol, who understood that interviews are always performances of one kind or another – for him the occasion when 'Andy puts his Warhol on'. In an interview in 1977, Glenn O'Brien, editor of *Interview* magazine (itself founded by Warhol in 1969), encouraged Warhol's deadpan one-liners, colluding in the presentation of the Warhol whom readers expected to 'hear'. In fact, Warhol and his magazine could be seen to have promulgated the advent of the self-advertising interviewee, who both displays and promotes him or herself. As O'Brien noted, 'I think Andy liked the questions, but most important, that he sounded smart and funny'.

Interview conveys its own specific perspective, which is quite different to the purpose of public archive or academic text. Knowing and understanding the context of an interview is a crucial component in the process of demystification and restoration, from which any attempt to reach the 'truth' must proceed; each channel transmits via its own particular frequency and vibrations. 'Listening in stereo' might be an apt metaphor for the dual approach to using narratives of experience as the basis for scholarship. The ethical dimension of using human subjects for research purposes demands that we treat their narratives respectfully, but scholars also have a responsibility to the ethics of scholarship. While pop interviews may be the subject of sociological enquiry, the life history or oral history is too often taken to mean what is said, and even celebrated as such. However, attention needs to be paid to how such narratives are configured and the conditions under which they are appropriated and transformed. How stories are configured is a significant part of their meaning, because stories about the past are made rather than found. As the historian Louis Mink famously remarked, 'Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell ourselves later.'

Interviews

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Colin St John Wilson
Interviewed by Jill Lever, 1996
Architects' Lives

The only significant changes that had emerged really over the period of 20 years or so since the design was put together in 1975 are both to do with the computer. In 1975 we had the heart of the building, the catalogue hall, and the catalogue hall was to have been surrounded by, as if it were wallpaper, the George III Library, the King's Library which is currently the wallpaper to the Kings Library in The British Museum. After that design had been evolved, approved and everything else, it became quite clear to the library that the catalogue was going to disappear into the computer, and for one awful moment we thought that the whole had dropped out of the middle of the design. And then we had the thought of turning the King's Library, not into wallpaper but into an object. It was part of George IV's gift to the nation, that those books ought to be seen by the general public, and this was suddenly just, you know, came the right way up to us for a change, an absolute gift for a really major visual monumental jewel to the crown. And so we replaced what would have been a sort of enclosure, a catalogue hall, with the King's books all round it, even though the public would have been allowed in to it, as it were, for that reason, instead into a six floor high glass-fronted bookcase with the beautiful binding, vellum and so on, as near as possible to the glass so they could be seen and on mobile stacks so they could be retracted so that anybody taking the books out to be read could go round to the front, take the book out and then the bookcase returned to its position close to the glass; and that would stand right in the centre to the entrance hall at the point where, if you were having a coffee in the restaurant, as it were, you could look at this. But almost wherever you are in the entrance hall, and as you go along the passerelles that lead from the Humanities side to the Sciences, at different levels you're walking past the beautiful books, they are also something else yet again which delights me architecturally which is some hint to you, or manifestation of the fact that the treasures are below ground but as it were they've sort of emerged, they've burst out of – in fact, I'm trying to do a sort of polished black granite round the base at the point where they, as it were, break through from the enormous basements which architecturally have no presence at all, and I suppose it's sort of dates me a bit, but I have memories of going to the cinema with my mum and dad in the days when the cinema organ used to come up from the floor and the chap played [hums tune], and then disappeared again. And the notion of something that is appearing from the underworld but also in this case manifesting itself as the magic object like the black box in Mecca.

Serge Chermayeff
Interviewed by Betty Blum, 1985
The Chicago Architects Oral History Project, Art Institute of Chicago

BB *Today is 23 May 1985 and I'm with Mr Serge Chermayeff in his home in Wellfleet, Massachusetts. Mr Chermayeff was born in 1900 in Russia. He was educated in England and lived there until 1939. He spent a few months in Canada before coming to the United States in 1940. In England he was associated with those who were in the forefront of the crusade of modernism. His personal commitment is demonstrated through his writings, his interior design and architecture. Mr Chermayeff, in the early 40s you came to the United States after others in the forefront of modernism such as Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, Moholy-Nagy and through the educational process . . .*

SC . . . I want to make a correction. I am 84 but if we now think of Mies, if he were alive, he'd be ten years older than I am; Corbu would be ten years older than I, if he were alive. I don't belong to what I think is the first wave of modernism. I'm in the second wave of younger men who followed in their footsteps. They felt they were leading architecture on totally different paths from the eclectic reproduction of various periods, without any contribution of originality and without any concern for the change in time, habit, technology and, generally speaking, the way of life in urban situations throughout Europe.

Andy Warhol
Interviewed by Glenn O'Brien, 1977
Interview magazine

GO *What was your ambition? To be an illustrator or a fine artist?*

AW I didn't have any ambition.

GO *Who was the first artist to influence you?*

AW It must have been Walt Disney. I cut out Walt Disney dolls. It was actually Snow White who influenced me.

Denys Lasdun
Interviewed by Jill Lever, 1997
Architects' Lives

The first question I was asked by a lady at a press conference in 1967 when we first presented was 'Where is the decoration?' To which I said, spontaneously, 'You are the decoration'. So you have a photograph up there which shows the strata with people on it . Now the person who said where is the detail? Is clearly, possibly, put off by the blandness or the blankness of the parapets, maybe, and is used to looking at buildings with walls and lots of things going on but he would, or she would then have to come to terms with buildings that do not have walls; and in the case of my work, the interest and the detail is in the soffit – that is above your head. In the rich, what's it called, the concrete, like the Pantheon, I mean it's the same, or like Gothic vaulting; it's the equivalent; and it's there in the detail in the handrail, what you actually put your hands on; it's in the detail of which way do you go the loo, in the emblematic signs that tell you what; it's in how the building is put together. For instance if you look very carefully, not you, if one looks very carefully and if anyone cleaned the building because it's filthy dirty, they would note that the shuttering boards are not equal, they're rough boards which are cut with a saw and they vary a quarter inch in thickness. The boards get delivered to the site before they're erected as shuttering, picked up by the building operative who has to do that sort of job, but he doesn't know which thickness he's picking up so he's contributing to the detail of that surface because some are forwards, some are back; it's not regular; he chooses. So the more you look – and then for instance the shuttering itself has a retarded agency on it so it dries at a different speed to the rest of the concrete, the result is it looks like an old fossil inside and you see people touching the concrete because all the grain of the wood, not invented by me, but this was something the modernists thought about in those days, and all the graining of the wood comes out in relief. And when it's beautifully lit, that's a detail that's well worth having. So if you're going to assess a building, not only have you got to look at the outside of the building, you've got to go into it. Had he or she gone in, they would have noticed that all the doors, everything, the lighting is all integrated and detailed with the coffering.