

PLATFORM

Provocative Timely Diverse

repair

Dec 4

Pulling Closer: Caregiving as Method, Part 2

Delia Duong Ba Wendel and Kush Patel

This article is the second in a three-part series. Click [here](#) to read part 1.

In 2021, the Society of Architectural Historians hosted the workshop [Caregiving as Method](#) to explore the role of caregiving in architecture. It was organized by [Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi](#) of Barnard College with contributions from [Jay Cephas](#), [Lilian Chee](#), [Elis Mendoza](#), [Ikem Stanley Okoye](#), [Itohan Osayimwese](#), [Peg Rawes](#), and the authors of this series of three articles: [Kush Patel](#) and [Delia Duong Ba Wendel](#). These presenters, whose papers were subsequently [published](#), were joined in three panels — one each on the topics of Care, Repair, and Method — by moderators [Can Bilisel](#), [Garnette Cadogan](#), and [Ana Miljački](#). The themes and questions animating the workshop were made especially timely by the pandemic but are, in many ways, ordinary engagements with questions of survival and support in contexts of social inequality. The workshop brought forward thoughts on caregiving by scholars whose historical work has been enriched, even defined, by their empathy for, and entanglement with, the care of others.

This article presents a transcript, edited for clarity and length, of the conversation on “Repair” that followed papers by Chee of the National University of Singapore (“Insinuations of Intimate Non-Histories”), Wendel of M.I.T. (“Unruly Sites of Repair”), and Cephas of Princeton University (“A Critical Closeness”), moderated by Miljački of M.I.T.

In retrospect, it is clear that the presenters in all three panels grappled most centrally with a question that Cadogan posed early on: what does it mean to think of care as a way of pulling “something” closer, or pulling others closer to you?

The dialogue that follows teases out the threads of an answer through bolded text. It is accompanied by a [bibliography](#) compiled by the presenters, that maps sources of inspiration for the conversations. We encourage readers to engage with it and the transcript below in any order. In assembling and emboldening those perspectives, this series seeks to model an act and method of care. It offers scaffolding for a scholarly commons: a means to read and draw connections to a range of work.

Ana Miljački (AM): I am interested in three key terms put forward in the papers: **affective labor, intimate historiography, and critical closeness**. Each contributes to a triad of **epistemological, political, and personal forms of repair**. All require what Delia has called “emotional labor” but also specific narrative choices. Delia spoke of time lapses in her story: an intimate history that foregrounds individuals affected by trauma and by places shaped by loss and activism. Lilian’s story is a collection of intimate micro-ethnographies whose very writing validates those it involves. Jay’s “critical closeness” implicates the historian in the writing in a way that may indeed transform both. I’m interested, particularly, in the ways in which **these concepts structure the kinds of narratives that you produce and whose voices you highlight**. So, my first question is technical: **how do we tell these stories, and which stories do we tell, when repair and intimacy are our concerns?** What is the emotional labor of writing these stories?

Images, it seems, have played interesting and important roles in these works. In Lilian’s work of **making visible** transient domestic labor, producing drawings seems of programmatic importance. In Delia’s and Jay’s work, **the presence and the absence of images**, respectively, has provoked criticism in other conversations within architectural history, even though in both cases the authors made this choice to repair the humanity and citizenship of those pictured. It seems that neither option made the “establishment” comfortable.

Jay Cephas (JC): It’s not that these methods necessarily structure connections, but that **this methodological approach is about recognizing the subjective aspect** of the conditions that we’re looking at. It is already tied up in the kind of narratives that are going to be produced. Maybe another way to look at it is that if we’re interested in telling particular stories that are laden with certain kinds of relationships or emotional issues, **the telling of those stories requires a methodology that allows us to get close to our subjects** in a certain way. For me, **the method is inextricable from the narrative**.

Delia Duong Ba Wendel (DW): We are each positioning ourselves to see harm, suffering, challenge, and struggle, alongside care and joy. This is **the type of exposure that we are conditioning for ourselves, for our architectural histories, and also for others**. In doing so, we recognize all that is typically not spoken about, and even rarely shown or seen. This is not always well-received. In presenting images related to my work, I have encountered audiences with different levels of ability, and willingness, to see images and stories marginalized from mainstream architectural history. But those images and stories matter. They go to the nature of the harms, conflicts, and struggles embedded in the making of value-laden environments.

Lilian Chee (LC): I want to return to Jay’s comment. There’s another layer, and that is that **we’re all drawing from our own experiences**. It’s **rare in academia** to bring in personal experience without alienating an audience because **the intimate is always seen as the same as the personal, although it isn’t**. The problem is that **narratives and experiences are also connected**. And if the narrative is controlled by specific theories then the experiences that we count as important will also be lessened. We will just choose the ones we think actually fit into the narratives which are already there. In contrast to the idea of theory being weakened by these types of subjects, we might consider theory as **constructed through experience**. **That theory is also changed by experience**. You’re making the theory, narrating the experience, and making the method.

AM: One of the terms that has come up is **intimacy**. For me, seeing and hearing these presentations live made all of it more intimate than reading them. And it isn’t just personal, but intimate, as Lilian suggests. **The image** registers as paramount in all three. On one end, we have **images that are redacted**; in another, **an insistence on presenting images**. **Lilian created images**. For me, there is a question about whether these relationships to images are made to return and repair the humanity of the subjects, and maybe even citizenship, as Delia suggested. But it is interesting to then consider **how the elimination of an image can function in a similar way as the insistence on including it**, and both register as your dedication to humanizing and repairing on behalf of your subjects and yourselves.

What’s also interesting is the extent to which architectural history seems uncomfortable with either choice. And in Lilian’s case, the drawing that you included seemed like an attempt to place into this conversation, through architectural terms, something that may have been understood as a minor or personal narrative on a subject or a group of subjects who don’t have theories yet to go with their lives.

JC: I would say **the key element here is the intentionality behind images**. The field is heavily dependent on images and at times overly concerned with them. The way that we're talking about images here concerns intent, and its role in the research. The critique that I found myself making of the use of images in architectural history is that too often, images are simply illustrations. The intention isn't related to the people in the images, at all. This also reflects how images function in society more broadly. We did not make this up as architectural historians; it reflects something larger. For me, it becomes an issue of thinking through how I'm using images, why I'm using them, what they say about my argument. And if there's no image that's relevant, then I don't use one even if I'm asked to, like today. **With the representation of people, especially certain kinds of bodies, there's a responsibility**. I want to hold myself to account.

DW: Jay, I couldn't agree with you more that the context and the intent of images are critical; they inform what those images do. In my work, the images of massacres and their conservation reveal a humanity and individuality that is not part of the narratives of genocide memorials in Rwanda. They add back the emotional and physical labor of making genocide memory. And they're part of a **politics of recognition**: a challenge to attempts to hide or deny that the violence occurred. They have a particular role in restoring humanity and articulating the human rights of those represented. It's in that spirit that I show and insist on those images. In some places, like previous conferences of the Society of Architectural Historians, there's been significant resistance to seeing those images. In those cases, I have found the disengagement bewildering. **What does it say that one refuses to see, to make it about one's own emotions and reception, and not about the struggles and survival of those shown?** That's not an exclusively moral question: it reflects on how we understand ourselves in relation to the histories we tell.

pulling...

[authorship and autobiographical voice]
[knowing and knowing with]
[post-custodial and unruly archives]
[relationships, positionalities, politics]
[vulnerability]
[intimate historiography]
[affective labor]
[agency and anguish of writing]
[inhabitation]
[passionate reasoning]
[disability]
[architectural expertise]
[relational nature of our work]

...closer

Figure 1. A graphic representation of key concepts and dilemmas that workshop participants put forward as central to relationships between caregiving and architecture. Each thematic grouping loosely responds to moderator Garnette Cadogan's question, "What does it mean to think of care as a way of pulling 'something' closer, or pulling others closer to you?" Presenters expanded the themes by collectively assembling a **bibliography** of related work.

LC: In my case, I or my student created those images. The [image that I included](#) was made by a student doing her design thesis. She was working through a concept of **co-authorship**. She started working with her grandmother's helper and as the thesis progressed the student and I talked about whether this caregiver should be a co-author. Towards the end the student rejected all the architectural conventions prompting me to **ask where all the architectural drawings were. She said that she decided not to include them because they didn't reveal her co-author, or her use of the space.** Architectural conventions erased the person who she wanted to acknowledge. Instead, the student used painterly photographs: Vermeer-like portraits which she shot herself. Some critiqued them as being peripheral to architecture. Typical studio protocols could not recognize or evaluate her work. It's strange that design work is supposed to be more speculative than scholarship, than architectural history. Yet **this speculation does not admit, and will not enable, certain categories into the image itself.**

AM: In the area in which I work, the socialist world of Eastern Europe and its transition to capitalism, there is a methodological idea that involves the labor of memory, put forward by historian [Tanja Petrović](#): **affective history**. In that context, affective history **invites a specific kind of embodied knowledge** of socialism to play a role in its historical description. This is meant to combat (and possibly repair) the Cold War, Western, neoliberal narrative. Especially in Yugoslavian studies it is also directed at validation of the experience of socialism. The personal experience has been used for writing the history of socialism when it has been negative. But when it has been positive, it hasn't found a place because it runs against Western narratives. Perhaps another set of considerations within the realm of affective or **intimate histories**.

Anooradha Iyer Siddiqi (AIS): We're all processing these three interventions. **A through-line I heard was scholars processing anguish**, and what it means for scholars to absorb it so that readers can then also process it in the name of a **reparative scholarship. Anguish as a method** would be something that we might focus on. The anti-tyrannical stance on images is one of the ways this took shape, but I think that it is an actual technique and part of your method that we might notate. We might also examine these ideas in relation to the idea of **care as embrace** that **Garnette** raised in the previous session, because you are each doing something with this embrace. That is the **method of reparative work**. Not to make the scholar the center of it, but it does have to do with a **scholar's labor in holding something in place that is very difficult to hold.**

Audience member: **How might building new types of archives be part of a practice of care?** What do the speakers envision as an archive of images or writings? What are the ways in which materials should be organized, categorized, and made accessible that retain some of the values of care that you all are suggesting? How would that archive retain those values of intimacy that Lillian brought up? I think one way to think about the intentionality that Jay referred to is to remain aware of one's own intentionality. And then, also all of these emotional and affective states that somehow can't be retained in the materials that Delia discussed — I'm just struggling with it.

DW: **It's important that an archive of these subjects remain unruly**, that the materials remain uncontainable and somehow not categorized so immediately, so that there is a process of engaging with the individuals, places, and memories that are registered through them. It's important, at least in my own work, that there be a process of inviting some kind of oral history or narrative, and that there is a way of understanding that **affective dimension**.

Itohan Osayimwese (IO): I'm starting to think about the **archive as an individual**, as a person. I would challenge historians to move away from conventions, and to think of something else that becomes part of the evidence and the structure of our arguments.

AM: Audience member Etien Santiago asks, in the Zoom chat feature: "Have you found instances where we can see **stories about care or sympathy embodied in buildings** and the built environment?" And Mia Kile asks, "How has your engagement with this process **empowered the individual to be part of the discussion**, or how has it advanced your own understanding of personal space and conditions?"

LC: I will try to respond to the second question. I've never read anything about domestic helpers in architectural history but have encountered quite a lot in the field of geography, and specifically in Singapore, because of the prevalence of that domestic work. But **something is lost** in the way it's been talked about, and in the interviews conducted. It's a lot like data: very little of the person is retained in the transcriptions of those interviews. When I read that work, I feel very sad and guilty. Because I need Cecil; she has become a surrogate person for my kids when I'm not around. I couldn't be sitting here, talking with you, without her help. She is watching my children sleep right now. So, Mia, your question is part of an everyday experience that I process daily, because I'm very aware that I am part of the problem that people like her have the opportunity to have this job. And yet, domestic helpers are being **represented in a particular way: disembodied and disentangled. It doesn't represent the person.** And I'm not sure how to do a better job. Perhaps we need storytelling in a more radical form. I've experimented with approaches to recovering those voices with a few short films. But it's very, **very difficult to be able to represent people in our texts without losing the person.**

AM: This conversation has confirmed for me that **we're all implicated, as Jay says, in our work.** That will be an important thing to continue to think about in addition to how **intimacy** and **anguish** motor some of the work that we do. For me, it is going to take some more emotional labor to figure out.

Citation

Delia Duong Ba Wendel and Kush Patel, "Pulling Closer: Caregiving as Method, Part 2," PLATFORM, December 4, 2023.

Conversations

scholarship, research, research methods, caregiving