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Dialogue III: Virtual Ambiguity: Navigating Memory amidst Erasure in Lagos and Haifa

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Abstract
This conversation examines how digital twinning and immersive VR design can mediate architectural memory in two cities shaped by erasure – Lagos and Haifa. Through Independence House in Lagos and the ruined structures of Wadi Salib in Haifa, the dialogue unpacks digital reconstruction as an unstable and affective practice, one that holds open what conventional documentation tends to flatten. Where surveying and photography record dimensions and surfaces, digital twins allow re-encounter with sites made inaccessible through alteration or destruction, keeping their transformation sensed rather than fixed.

The digital twinning of Independence House and the photogrammetric record of Tafawa Balewa Square's gates propelled reconstruction efforts and opened public debate about the disappearance of tropical modernism in Lagos. In Haifa, similar techniques reframe preservation as a participatory and speculative act rather than a static archival one. Both cases argue for the digital model as a memory infrastructure that can hold conflicting narratives without resolving them – a field for critique and collective engagement with contested architectural futures.

Keywords
Digital twinning, architectural erasure, tropical modernism, virtual heritage, Lagos, Haifa

One sentence summary
This conversation explores digital twinning as a way to resist architectural erasure in Lagos and Haifa by sustaining ambiguity and enabling renewed, participatory engagement with contested and unfinished histories.

OMI – Abdullah: Until air travel overtook water transport as a dominant mode of intercontinental transport to (and from) Nigeria between the 1960s and '70s, ferrying into Lagos on a ship carrier convinced one that modernism had found strong roots in what was originally Lagos's foreshore. Modernist office buildings – of concrete, glass, and interesting skins of mosaic art – sprang up at unfamiliar heights. One of the earliest buildings to have dominated Lagos's skyline is Independence House.

Independence House is a twenty-five-storey building west of Tafawa Balewa Square and part of Lagos's former racecourse complex. It is an 'extraordinary thing' of reinforced concrete that, despite its height, has an 'inaccuracy of the outside columns of the building not more than a quarter of an inch'.[1] It has an impressive minimal facade of repeating concrete strips, each about one 150mm thick and no less than 1m deep, to help the building 'self-cool'. As was the case with most modernist buildings in Nigeria at the

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time, climatic control was a key concern. This parting gift by the British government to Nigeria on the occasion of independence served as the government's federal secretariat and later the defence headquarters, before it was destroyed in a fire under suspicious circumstances in 1993 and eventually abandoned. It is now derelict, and used mainly as a place to put up large posters and signage. [Fig.1].

Many of the sterling examples of buildings from this period – like the defunct Elder Dempster shipping line's head office (1964), Barclays Bank (1960) and the Nigerian Postal Service (c. 1960) – face a similar fate in Lagos today. If they are not slated to be demolished, they are renovated without recourse to the ideologies of tropical modernism. This style showed a form of environmentally responsive design through its use of strategic orientation, double-skin facades, breeze blocks, fair-faced concrete finishes, and brise soleil, among other associated architectural features. Preserving these qualities is not about staying locked in the past, but about maintaining an architecture that remains genuinely responsive to its context. There is an urgent need to conserve these buildings before the pace of change renders that possibility irreversible.

Eytan: The modernist ambition of Independence House was intended to symbolise progress, and now serves as an unsettling reminder of colonisation – haunted by the city's unresolved heritage, caught between modernisation and national self-definition. The emptied building is not a romantic ruin frozen in time and admired from afar, but an ongoing, active and unstable process.[2] Its monumental role resists definition precisely because its future life remains in dispute.

In my own work, I'm drawn to that same ambiguity, which surfaces with particular urgency in the Israeli landscape. Working in Wadi Salib, a destroyed neighbourhood in the heart of Haifa, I was driven to record the architecture and take it 'back to the lab' – to capture it before it shifts again, is overwritten, or disappears entirely. While surveying, drawings and photography record dimensions, materials and construction techniques, and the 3D scan adds an experiential dimension: the ability to revisit space, at least partially. The spatial experience of the ruin generates questions – what happened here? What were the circumstances of destruction? Who lived here, and where did they go? These are the questions that drive spatial investigation, in the tradition of Forensic Architecture, though with a different epistemological aim: not to establish objective truth but to hold ambiguity open.

In the case of Wadi Salib, a single structure that stood in the heart of a once-dense Palestinian neighbourhood is now slated for preservation, with a poster on its façade declaring its intended renewal. The image printed on the billboard claims to renew its past, as conservation projects often do, yet this violent past is rendered unproblematic, unquestioned – with no mention of Palestinian existence. Architecture preservation is ironically used as an instrument of erasure. Given all this, the ability to capture architecture in its present time, including an increased experiential dimension using 3D scanning has struck me as an urgent practice. I realise you too, are driven by an urge to witness, by staying close to architecture's spatial and material experience, as it hovers between presence and disappearance.[3] [Fig 2]

Lago and Haifa offer different historical contexts and historiographical urgencies, yet they share a palimpsestical challenge of coming to terms with national identity through architecture. I want to know more about how you came up with the idea to use 3D scanning, specifically photogrammetry, to capture Independence House. What is the reason for choosing this medium over another? What did you hope to preserve or perhaps reveal that traditional recording methods might have missed?

OMI – Abdullah: Our decision to adopt photogrammetry to record modernist buildings like Independence House stemmed from witnessing their steady erasure through demolition, unsympathetic renovations, or sheer neglect – in historic Nigerian cities like Lagos. Often, these changes occurred despite the buildings' listed status, resulting in a ruthless and disheartening transformation of the urban landscape.

When we launched the Nigerian Modernism Project in 2023, more than thirty tropical modernist buildings had already been demolished, abandoned or altered beyond recognition.[4] We found that traditional recording methods, such as drawings and photographs, were insufficient to capture both the rapid changes and the layered ambiguities surrounding these structures.

Photogrammetry offered a powerful alternative. It allowed us to keep pace with the speed of architectural erasure, to create comprehensive digital models that could be used to teach and explore the decolonial histories often overlooked in architectural education, and to establish accurate references for future restoration, should the will to preserve or conserve these buildings emerge.[5]

A striking example of this potential lies in our scan of the last surviving pair of gates at Tafawa Balewa Square, adjacent to Independence House, which were destroyed. Plans are underway for the demolished gates to be reproduced from this digital model – a small event, but significant of the erasure we set out to document.

Eytan: So this is more than a symbolic reversal of erasure – it is a deliberate reinsertion of the past into the present.



Fig. 1: An elevation of Independence House. Photo: Jide Ayeni.

How did that reconstruction come about, and how did the community or institutions around it respond? Independence House is a particularly revealing case: modernist architecture is so often critiqued for suppressing the Indigenous and embodying the spatial logic of colonial bureaucracy, now itself at risk of disappearance. And yet it occupies a cultural and political role in Nigeria's post-independence identity that can't simply be set aside.[6]

In this light, the photogrammetric model becomes more than a recording technique - it is an archival act, and in Derrida's sense, never a neutral one: to determine what is archivable is already to exercise power over what can be remembered and claimed. It becomes virtual – a speculative medium that offers something the physical residue, or even a material restoration, cannot. The virtual model positions the ruin on what Deleuze and Guattari call the 'plane of immanence', treating every laser-measured stone as part of an open field where neglected colonial masonry can link to new stories and futures – open to re-inhabitation rather than sealed as heritage.

Immersive virtual models reclaim a kind of agency that conventional preservation cannot. To walk through Independence House's entrance hall, to encounter the mural, to move through the space as a body-in-place – rendered in real time to the headset according to your own movements – is a critical re-encounter with the built environment. It allows architecture to be experienced not only as historical fact but through critical fabulation: fact-driven fiction. The viewer is not passive but involved in the production of the space, which is precisely what undermines the preservationist logic that treats the building as an untouchable relic. This medium insists on presence where the physical fabric no longer can.

In Wadi Salib the stakes are different but the tension is the same. The question there is not only how to resist a sanitised preservation that maintains facades while erasing meaning, but how to respond to the active removal of Palestinian history from the Israeli built landscape. Bringing the ruin into a pedagogical setting – the architecture studio, the immersive environment – raises the possibility of something more deliberate: activist preservation. Not neutral heritage work, but a practice that names who is doing the erasing and insists on whose memory the archive is for.

OMI – Olorunfemi: The reconstruction of the Tafawa Balewa Square gates was in many ways an unexpected affirmation of the 'potential of the virtual'. The gates, tall, sculpturally geometric, and imposing, measuring 4.93m by 7.2m, once framed the entrance to Nigeria's national parade ground, a space that became symbolic of sovereignty and ceremonial power. When they were demolished amid a change of ownership, their loss felt abrupt, part of the insidious, almost casual erasure of symbolic architecture and, by extension, the city's memory.

We then had the opportunity to create a detailed photogrammetric model of the gates months later. This was largely due to public pressure from conservation advocates. The attempted reconstruction of the Tafawa Balewa Square Gates is the brainchild of a group of concerned architects and community stakeholders headed by Chuka Ihonor, a Lagos-based architect who afforded us access to document the remaining gates. Our role was specifically focused on documentation, with less involvement in the politics of the proposed reconstruction. However, there was consensus with state authorities that the gates contributed significantly to the story of the complex. Although designed by a British artist, Paul Mount, he collaborated with local artists in its realisation. The model we produced became crucial in communicating with fabricators and craftspeople. It provided both dimensional precision and visual fidelity that archival photos alone could not offer.

You are right to point out that this kind of digital technique offers something more than documentation: a stage for advocacy and protest against the waste or abandonment of these architectural sites of knowledge. In the hands of practitioners, the results become a kind of memory infrastructure capable of being projected onto different realities.

The idea that a virtual clone of an interior, especially one tied to contested, layered histories, might serve not just as a record or monument but as a site for reconciliation is fascinating. It points to a shift from static remembrance to preservation as a form of activation. In this sense, the virtual model becomes an effective tool. It allows people to engage with architecture as memory infrastructure, a space where multiple, even conflicting narratives can coexist without being flattened into a single, sanitised story.

An 'imaginative return' suggests that virtual reconstructions can help us reinhabit spaces that were physically erased, politically silenced, or emotionally abandoned. Not to reproduce them exactly as they were, but to re-encounter them in ways that allow grief, reflection, critique and possibility. I am particularly interested in how you have explored Wadi Salib in pedagogy to this effect. Dare I say it serves as a tool for spatial justice?

Eytan: Your phrase 'memory infrastructure capable of being projected onto different realities' has stayed with me. It reframes memory, especially in spaces marked by conflict and erasure, not as something to be secured or settled, but as something that can be held open, projected, inhabited differently by different people.

While the language of spatial justice is often invoked in such projects, I find it can be confining. It risks casting



Fig. 2: An elevation of Abu Hatzira-Reno House, with a sign presenting a rendered image of the plan restoration work. Photo: Eytan Mann.

heritage as a battleground where one side must prevail – one truth recognised, another rejected. In places like Wadi Salib, that framing can foreclose more than it opens. Working in VR produces an affect that doesn't immediately demand political alignment. It evokes atmosphere, presence, disturbance – and from that, empathy may emerge, along with the tentative possibility of reconciliation. This is not a forensic exercise. It doesn't strive to restore events as they were. It works differently: allowing the ambiguity of a place to come through, treating complexity as the condition rather than the problem. That, in the end, can be more politically productive than any national narrative, which so often purchases coherence at the cost of contradiction.

Which brings me back to Lagos. Independence House, like the gates at Tafawa Balewa Square, is not just a remnant – it is an unfinished proposition. I want to ask whether the digital model can do more than preserve what was lost: can it allow us to dwell in the ambiguity of what was contested, or even to imagine what was never allowed to exist? How do you see this layered past – indigenous and outsider modernism entangled – not as heritage to be secured, but as a force that might still shape the city's future?

OMI – Olorunfemi: Unfinished propositions are a strong way to frame the work and an important point of reflection, especially because architecture is never truly finished. It grows, changes and shifts according to human needs, economics and politics. In the case of these buildings and the gate, which featured the work of artists, they may not yet have reached their full potential as tools for decolonising architecture. In that light, yes, I do think the digital model carries this duality. On the one hand, it serves as a stage for preservation and remembrance. On the other hand, it functions as a memory infrastructure that creates space for contestation. After all, you can't contest what didn't exist or what wasn't known to be a 'truth'. Ambiguity arising from contestation may not be a void, but rather something generative.

I'm increasingly convinced that the virtual model can help us democratise the projection of realities. Whereas physical access to these buildings remains deeply politicised and limited, the virtual version opens new modes of entry and engagement. By democratising access, perhaps we can foster more critical conversations about how these structures might evolve in the future. As an act of inhabiting, however, I'm challenged by how much the model itself can hold. But if we move past the idea of the archive as capturing only the physical dimension of the building, I'm intrigued by the potential of layering the everyday life stories embedded within these spaces. These are stories that may influence the new realities we imagine. [Fig 3].

Take Independence House, for instance. It was the victim of arson, an event that introduces layered histories of destruction, fraud, loss of trust, betrayal, and state failure. These are narratives rarely captured when buildings are preserved through conventional means. Yet by layering in physical accounts, news clippings, videos and objects – materials that typically remain peripheral to architectural heritage – the model can open the possibility of revealing alternate futures. So yes, I do believe the digital model allows us to dwell not just in what is being lost, but in the everyday life of the architecture, which cannot be represented formally. It frees us from the binary of preservation versus erasure. We can inhabit the speculative, and through that arrive at what might be the best new life for the architecture. And perhaps more importantly, we can do so collectively, through shared memory, imagination and critique. That is the work I hope we continue in Lagos, Haifa and beyond.

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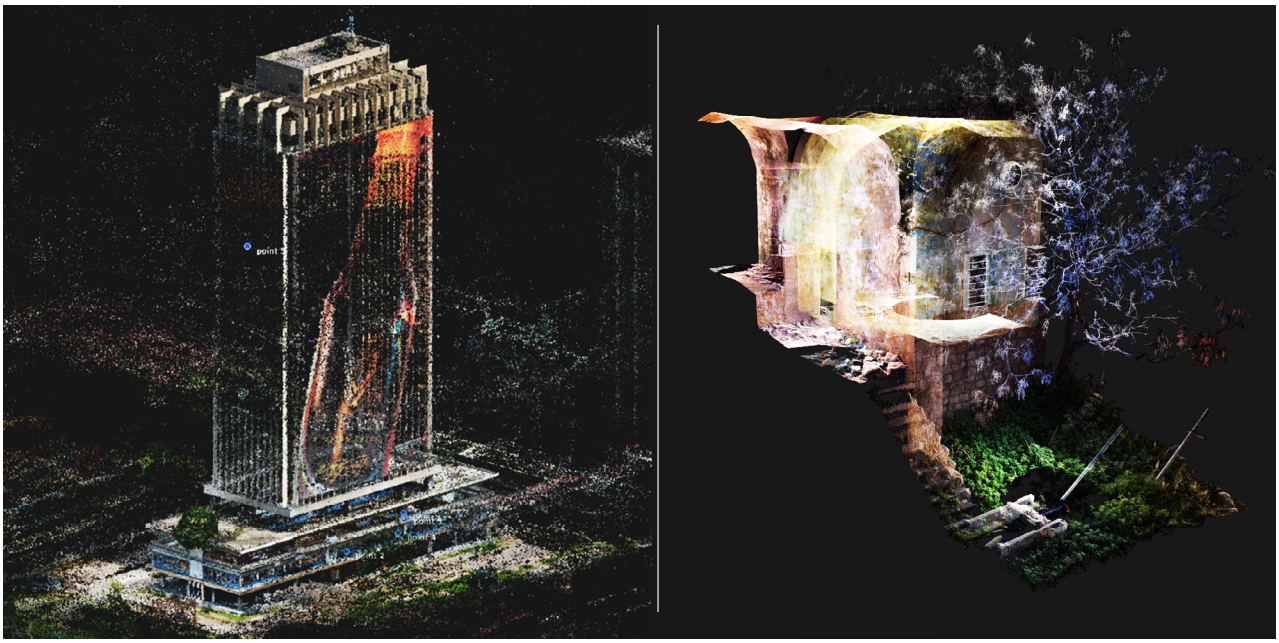


Fig. 3: Point cloud visualisations were produced with 3D scanning of Abu Hatzira-Reno house in Haifa and Independent House in Lagos. Source: authors.

Notes

1. Peter Nkanga, 'The Independence House Lagos Not Many Know About', Nairaland Forum, 2 March 2022, https://www.nairaland.com/7011874/independence-house-lagos-not-many.
2. Bjørnar Olsen argues that a ruin is never a closed book but 'able to actualize a past that is otherwise forgotten', precisely because it endures in place. His reference to the crumbling Argive castle that suddenly served again as a fortress underscores how material remains keep past and present in circulation as a 'living monument' that continuously stages memory. Bjørnar Olsen, Michael Shanks, Timothy Webmoor and Christopher Witmore, *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).
3. Photogrammetry reconstructs three-dimensional spatial geometry from overlapping photographs by triangulating common points across images, producing models that can be revisited, measured, and manipulated independently of the physical site.
4. The Nigerian Modernism Project is run by Omi Collective, Lagos – a research and documentation initiative focused on tropical modernist architecture in Nigeria.
5. The history of decolonial architecture in Nigeria remains understudied. See Olorunfemi Adewuyi, 'Regional Modernisms; Tropical Skins', *Disegno Journal Online*, 19 February 2024, https://disegnojournal.com/newsfeed/regional-modernisms-tropical-skins.
6. See Yfaat Weiss, *A Confiscated Memory: Wadi Salib and Haifa's Lost Heritage* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) and Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss, 'A Tale of Two Houses', in *Haifa Before and After 1948: Narratives of a Mixed City*, ed. Mahmoud Yazbak and Yfaat Weiss (Dordrecht: Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation and Republic of Letters Publishing, 2011), 11–42. Both texts address the entanglement of colonial land seizure and heritage claims in Haifa's built environment.

Biography

Abdullah Ogunsetan is A3–Archnet's 2020 prize-winning applicant for writing about African architecture. Following a series of training and workshops that accompanied this award at the MIT Libraries, he has dedicated himself to collecting metadata on Nigeria's built environment, much of which has remained under-documented, inaccessible, or non-digitised. He continues these vital efforts with Omi Collective, where he leads research to document and preserve modernist and post-colonial buildings using photogrammetry. His work has been presented at the Jaap Bakema Study Centre's Conference in 2024 and exhibited in 2025 at the Saudi Pavilion of the Venice Biennale. Abdullah holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from the University of Lagos, where he is currently enrolled in the master's programme in environmental design in architecture.

Olorunfemi Adewuyi is an architect and researcher. He founded Omi Collective (2023, Lagos), an antidisciplinary design and research group working across architecture, urbanism, objects, and research. Omi, meaning "water" in Yoruba, his mother tongue, reflects Adewuyi's sustained engagement with the politics and poetics of this resource. He approaches architecture as a method for producing intelligence from contradiction, studying and transforming the pressures of material life, culture, memory, and power into (plat) forms that can be inhabited, questioned, and extended. Through this process, his work brings latent and dismissed intelligences into view. Adewuyi is the recipient of awards and fellowships, and was recognised by Wallpaper* and Dwell in 2025 as a notable emerging designer. His work circulates internationally through respected journals, exhibitions, and institutions. Adewuyi's research on modernism in Lagos was supported by the Goethe-Institut Nigeria's Support and Connect Grant in 2024.

Eytan Mann is an assistant professor at the Department of Architecture at TU Delft, and a member of the Architecture Archives of the Future group. He is an architect and computational designer whose work explores the intersection of data-driven design and architectural historiography. Through his research, he investigates modes of transmedia historiography by combining archival material with digital modelling, leveraging computation to augment sites and archives, and designing new interfaces with heritage. As part of a design collective, he collaborates on projects across various sites that explore innovative approaches to augmenting historical methods through digital technologies. His practice bridges theoretical research with hands-on digital experimentation, seeking new ways to interpret and present architectural heritage. Eytan holds an SMarchS degree from MIT School of Architecture and a PhD in architecture from the Technion Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, where his research focused on computational approaches to architectural history.