

# The Eternal Present of the Mythical Event

## Re-establishing Place Identity with Speculative Installations that Reawaken Heritage Stories

Professor Daniel K. Brown

**“It is the eternal present of the mythical event that makes possible the profane duration of historical events.”** *Mircea Eliade*

### Abstract

This paper proposes that speculative architectural installations strategically ‘curated’ into neglected architectural contexts can help to engender an ‘immediate and a timeless realm,’ an encapsulation of a cultural story that the new interventions help to embody. The research method investigates historical and cultural narratives that were once associated with selected architectural and urban sites that have lost their place identity over time. Designed research experiments examine how place identity can be rejuvenated by strategically curating objects, digital animation and sound into these architectural contexts in ways that bring their essential stories to life again, allowing cultural and heritage memories to be collectively experienced and shared. The research concludes that speculative architectural installations provide an opportunity to reach a much wider public audience than traditional academic scholarly approaches alone. Through community-based and collaborative creative practice, such architectural research can critically explore – and help to mediate and mitigate – seemingly intractable contemporary architectural problems such as the loss of cultural, heritage

and place identity in our evolving urban environments. The research that looked at a derelict urban site in Rome played a significant role in convincing the Rome City Council that strategic application of cultural, mythological and historical experiences is a viable cost-effective way to culturally revitalise neglected and derelict public spaces.

### Introduction

This paper examines the problem of the loss of cultural and heritage narratives that are needed to define place identity. It investigates how neglected architectural and urban sites can be revitalised by strategically ‘curating’ speculative architectural installations into neglected architectural contexts to re-establish critical links to their lost essential stories. In an online interview in 2010, Lebbeus Woods reflects upon the important role speculative architecture can play in responding to ‘seemingly intractable problems,’ but he stresses that there is an inherent risk when speculative design is disassociated from an architectural context’s essential stories:



Figure 1. Kristin Jones, Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger, *Solstizio d'Estate, Tiber River, Rome*, launch date June 21, 2005.

When you take architecture away from the narratives of history, from the signs and symbols giving social existence agreed-upon meanings, you are putting a big responsibility on individuals to give meaning by the actions. The architect makes the first move by investing space with his or her understanding of the conditions and demands of reality.<sup>1</sup>

This paper reflects on a body of research conducted over a fifteen-year period that examines how contextualised speculative interventions can renew place identity by reawakening a site's lost essential narratives. The place identity research from 2005–2010, conducted in Rome, Venice and New York, is referred to as *Tevereterno*. The related research from 2010–2020, conducted primarily in New Zealand, is called *The Eternal Present of the Mythical Event in New Zealand and Beyond*. Plaques and signage are the most common approach to reminding communities about cultural and heritage narratives that once defined place identity. These stories are typically summarised in text and graphic images. This research article proposes that contextualised speculative art installations provide an opportunity to return place identity into the experiential and observational realms.

A two-part research method is common to all projects presented in this article. In part one, cultural, mythological and heritage stories relating to a specific architectural context are collected and researched; in part two,

which involves on-site testing, the stories are critically interrogated in relation to how they might be reawakened in the selected architectural context using digital animation, projection, object and sound. The selected architectural context plays a key role as the 'setting' for the reawakened cultural narrative.

## Tevereterno: The Eternal Tiber River Project

In 2010, New York installation artist Kristin Jones and the author were invited to showcase a 2005–2010 retrospective of our architectural research in the host Italian Pavilion of the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale. We called the exhibition *Tevereterno*, which translates as 'The Eternal Tiber River Project.' The Italian Pavilion selected work that "unveils a vision of architecture as civil art capable of generating solutions for a society in the midst of deep-seated change."<sup>2</sup>

The research site for *Tevereterno* in 2005 was a dilapidated and abandoned half-kilometre stretch of the Tiber River, in the centre of historic Rome between the Sisto and Mazzini Bridges, that was completely overgrown and visited only by drug addicts and criminals. Our principal research question asked: "How can such a site in the heart of Rome, by blurring the boundaries between art and architecture, be rejuvenated into an important civic centre for the capital city that can help renew place identity for its people?"

1. Lebbeus Woods, interviewed by Sebastiano Olivetto, "AS IT IS: Interview with LW 2," April 22, 2010, <https://lebbeuswoods.wordpress.com/2010/04/22/as-it-is-interview-with-lw-2>.

2. "Italian Pavilion at the 12th International Architecture Exhibition – People Meet in Architecture | La Biennale di Venezia," September 15, 2010, <https://www.1fmediaproject.net/2010/09/15/italian-pavilion-at-the-12th-international-architecture-exhibition-people-meet-in-architecture-la-biennale-di-venezia>.



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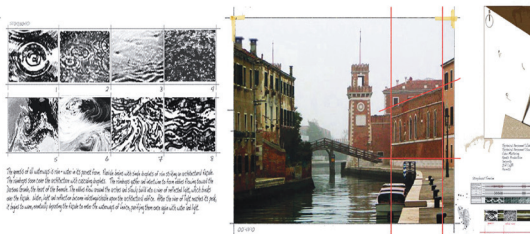


Figure 2. (From top left, clockwise) a) Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger, *Four Arias at the Edge of Darkness*, Tiber River, Rome, June 22, 2006; b) Kristin Jones and Daniel K. Brown, *Luminalia*, Tiber River, Rome, June 22, 2007; c) Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger, *Intermezzo*, Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori, Capitoline Hill, Rome, April 21, 2009; d) Daniel K. Brown and Kristin Jones, *Fluviale*, Venice, November 21, 2010.

The *Tevereterno* site was the only straight segment of the Tiber River. It was also the same size as the ancient Circus Maximus, now only a trace upon the landscape, which had once been the most important centre for public gatherings in the ancient Roman empire; no site in Rome fulfils this vital function today. In seeking to return such a site to Rome once again, the research looked at reawakening the neglected site's essential cultural and heritage stories.

According to legend, Rome was founded by Romulus and Remus, who were suckled as infants by a she-wolf. The first of the six research experiments for Tevereterno, called *Solstizio d'Estate*<sup>3</sup> (Figure 1), was conceived to reawaken the she-wolf on the *Tevereterno* site as a rejuvenated symbol of Rome's identity. We researched ancient illustrations, carvings, amulets and coins, selecting twelve historical images of the she-wolf that represent her transforming over time. We enlarged the images to 8 metres high, cut them out of sheets of polyethylene, and attached these she-wolf 'stencils' in chronological order to the 13-metre high Tiber River embankment walls. Using high-pressure hoses, centuries of patina were washed away to reveal the she-wolves that had always lived upon the ancient walls. At sunset on the night of the summer solstice, 2758 candles were lit along the Tiber embankments to commemorate the number of years since the legendary founding of Rome. More than 4000 people attended the opening, and the work remained visible for over five years before gradually being enveloped by patina once more.

From 2006–2010, *Solstizio d'Estate* was followed every year by a new, full-scale, design-research experiment. *Four Arias at the Edge of Darkness*<sup>4</sup> (Figure 2a) presented the Roman she-wolf on the Tiber River walls as the digitally projected embodiment of the four elements of nature. *Luminalia*<sup>5</sup> (Figure 2b) reawakened the serpent of fire of the ancient Roman god of medicine; one thousand candles lined each bank of the Tiber River, while the serpent was formed from another thousand candles floating in the centre of the Tiber, taking life from the currents and carrying light into the darkness. *Intermezzo*<sup>6</sup> (Figure 2c) was projected onto the façade of Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori on

Rome's Capitoline Hill to reawaken the she-wolf for the Birth of Rome celebrations. *Fluviale*<sup>7</sup> (Figure 2d) projected the waters of Venice onto the façades of her architecture to reflect upon the importance of ensuring the sustainability of our waterways.

Each of the design outcomes relating to *Tevereterno* required extensive background research on the ecology, mythology and history of the place where it was situated. Each of the outcomes explored ways to rejuvenate neglected architectural and urban spaces by reawakening a culture's myth lines. The retrospective of our work at the 2010 Venice Architecture Biennale had a significant impact on convincing the city of Rome to begin transforming the dilapidated Tiber River site into a permanent public arts area beginning in 2011. The significance, originality and international esteem of the research outcomes of the *Tevereterno* project were further evidenced by these works premiering on opening or closing nights of highly competitive major international festivals such as the Birth of Rome Celebrations, the New York River to River Festival, and the European Festival of Music; substantial external funding; audience numbers ranging from over 1000 on Capitoline Hill to 170,000 at the Venice Architecture Biennale; and positive reviews in international publications.

## The Eternal Present of the Mythical Event

In *The Sacred and The Profane*, Mircea Eliade reflects: "It is the eternal present of the mythical event that makes possible the profane duration of historical events."<sup>8</sup> The *Tevereterno* projects represent our response to reawakening a mythological event as a way to renew place identity for our research sites. In his book *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research*, RMIT Professor of Design/Urbanism Paul Carter uses the metaphor of weaving to reflect how stories and myths participate in place identity:

*The warp is composed of the threads extended lengthwise in the loom. These can be thought of as the culture's myth lines, the grand narratives in terms of which it defines its sense of place*

3. Kristin Jones, Daniel K. Brown, and Erika Kruger, *Solstizio d'Estate*, Tiber River, Rome, launch date June 21, 2005, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=1338> and <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=1715>.

4. Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger, *Four Arias at the Edge of Darkness*, Tiber River, Rome, June 22, 2006, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=181> and <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=200>.

5. Kristin Jones and Daniel K. Brown, *Luminalia*, Tiber River, Rome, June 22, 2007, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=204> and <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=1847>.

6. Daniel K. Brown and Erika Kruger, *Intermezzo*, Michelangelo's Palazzo dei Conservatori, Capitoline Hill, Rome, April 21, 2009, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=209>.

7. Daniel K. Brown and Kristin Jones, *Fluviale*, Venice, November 21, 2010, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=1218> and <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=1284> and <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=239>.

8. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 2.



and identity. But these linear narratives can neither cohere to form a pattern nor be subverted and overturned, unless the shuttle of local invention is at work, casting its woof-thread back and forth, over and under the warp-threads. Only in this way can cultures collectively gain agency over their story lines, learning to become themselves at this place.<sup>9</sup>

In their book *Memory and Transformation*, Blerck et al. describe landscape as “stratified heritage” laden with values, stories, myths, practices and the memories that we associate with them. The identity of the landscape – and our identification with the landscape – arise directly from these collective stories and memories.<sup>10</sup> In his article “Building Memory: Ontology in Architecture,” Jeff Malpas argues that there is no place identity without memory:

*Place and memory are integrally connected such that they cannot be understood independently. Place and building are likewise tied, because architecture is always a response to place. The inquiry into the ontology of architecture must therefore include an inquiry into the relation between memory and place. Simply stated, there is no place without memory, no memory without place, and, since there is no architecture without place, neither is there architecture that is not engaged with memory.<sup>11</sup>*

In her article “Writing Spatial Stories: Textual Narratives in the Museum,” Suzanne MacLeod, Senior Lecturer in the School of Museum Studies, University of Leicester, UK, argues that a curated museum exhibit places objects into strategic contextual relationships that, when experienced together, tell a story. We interpret and critically engage these stories through collective and personal memory. MacLeod proposes that, in the same way that successful museum exhibitions can engender a story, architectural artefacts can be ‘curated’ to reawaken essential stories of cultural heritage that contribute to place making. She contends that in a landscape, historic fragments are simply larger than those in a museum, and their stories “more epic in scale, grounded as they are in collective and personal memory.”<sup>12</sup> The strategic curating of contextual architectural artefacts together with new design interventions can contribute to storytelling, the combined elements becoming recognisable

as an encapsulation of an essential narrative. In his article “Notes on the In-between,” Fred Koetter proposes:

*The artifact – city, building, painting, whatever – has then, in the best sense, its own double obligation. It may act as a positive instrument for the qualification of human association (artifact as in-between ‘table’) and at the same time it may in itself present an encapsulation of the same uncertain drama of reality which it helps to qualify and stimulate. The artifact, in other words, may operate as both active agent and as a means of record-keeping, occupying a realm which is both ‘immediate’ and potentially timeless.<sup>13</sup>*

### The Eternal Present of the Mythical Event in New Zealand and Beyond

The two-part methodology that had been applied to the *Tevereterno* projects from 2005 to 2010 was also applied to place identity-related research projects in New Zealand from 2010 to 2020. Background research was undertaken that interrogated important cultural, mythological and heritage stories relating to a specific site, followed by on-site testing of a speculative installation proposition that would enable a story to be experienced and remembered. The first New Zealand heritage architectural site selected was the Museum of Wellington, located on the capital city’s harbour edge.

In 2010, the Museum of Wellington commissioned the author to create a new work for the New Zealand International Arts Festival, to be located in their main exhibition space on a three-storey-high atrium wall of the heritage building. The author’s proposal *Vessels*<sup>14</sup> (Figure 3) was inspired by a passage in Book II of Dante Alighieri’s epic poem *The Divine Comedy*. This passage, written by Dante in the early fourteenth century, predicted that directly opposite Jerusalem in the great oceans of the Southern Hemisphere lay an island, above which shone a constellation of stars in the shape of a cross.<sup>15</sup> The island directly opposite Jerusalem was approximately where New Zealand lies today. The reason this discovery was particularly inspiring, as a cultural and mythological story

9. Paul Carter, *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice of Creative Research* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2004), 7.

10. Henk van Blerck, Olof Koekebakker, and Bert van Meggelen, *Memory and Transformation* (Rotterdam: NAi Publishers, 2008), 17.

11. Jeff Malpas, “Building Memory: Ontology in Architecture,” *Interstices: Journal of Architecture and Related Arts* 13 (2012): 11–21.

12. Suzanne MacLeod, “Writing Spatial Stories: Textual Narratives in the Museum,” in *Museum Making: Narratives, Architectures, Exhibition*, ed. Suzanne MacLeod, Laura Hourston Hanks, and Jonathan Hale (London and New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2012), 21–33.

13. Fred Koetter, “Notes on the In-between,” *Harvard Architecture Review* (Spring 1980): 71.

14. Daniel K. Brown, *Vessels*, Museum of Wellington, February 26–March 21, 2010, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=212>.

15. Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*, trans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Purgatorio: Canto I, 22–27; Canto II, 1–9, [https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1002/1002-h/1002-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0006](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1002/1002-h/1002-h.htm#link2H_4_0006).



Figure 3. Daniel K. Brown, *Vessels*, Museum of Wellington, February 26–March 21, 2010.

relating to New Zealand place identity, was that Dante's epic poem goes on to declare that atop this island still sits the original Garden of Paradise. This discovery became the inspiring mythological narrative tale that *Vessels* sought to convey to New Zealanders.

*Vessels* initially required background research in the humanities, interpreting passages and symbolism from a great piece of literature. But in the second stage of the methodology, *Vessels* required a very different type of research: the setting up of an off-site testing lab, soon followed by on-site, full-scale experimentation. Like the form of the sacred island described in *The Divine Comedy*, *Vessels* was structured as seven terraces suspended upon the museum's atrium wall. Thirty-three glass vessels of water were placed upon the terraces, representing the thirty-three 'cantos' or 'songs' of Book II of the poem. The glass vessels were designed to vibrate in response to the movements of visitors in the museum. When no visitors are present, the work falls still. But when visitors gather, the vibrations send a myriad of light reflections from the glass bowls – in this way representing the sacred vessel in *The Divine Comedy* that reflects light so "radiant" that the eye can barely endure it.<sup>16</sup> The radiating light in *Vessels* was conceived to awaken our recognition of New Zealand as the earthly Garden of Paradise.

16. Ibid, Canto II, 38–39.

17. Daniel K. Brown, *Pulse*, LUX Light Festival, Wellington, August 21–30, 2015, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=3488> and LUMA Southern Light Project, Queenstown Botanical Gardens, Queenstown, June 3–5, 2016, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=4792>.





Figure 4. (Left to right) Daniel K. Brown, a) *Pulse*, LUX Light Festival, Wellington, August 21–30, 2015; b) *Edge of the Universe*, LUX Light Festival, Wellington, May 18–27, 2018.

*Vessels* was followed every year by a new, full-scale, design-research experiment. *Pulse*<sup>17</sup> (Figure 4a) was a sound and light animation sited beneath the wharf cut-out outside the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington. The installation unveiled the *pulse* of nature still beating beneath the concrete paving of our capital city, returning it to the awareness of the community once more.

*Edge of the Universe*<sup>18</sup> (Figure 4b) explored the ‘seemingly intractable problem’ of introducing urban youth to life lessons that can be conveyed through poetry. Each evening after sunset, letters of the alphabet cascaded like a waterfall from the cornice of an urban shed on the harbour edge of Wellington. As the falling letters gain in intensity and momentum, they spell out selected lines from six poems by New Zealand writers, before disappearing into the water below. When integrated together, the selected lines invite a larger, new story to unfold – a story about the importance of taking risks, learning from mistakes, trying to make a difference, seeing the light within the darkness, and gaining wisdom over time.

*Te Toi-o-ngā-rangi*<sup>19</sup> (Figure 5) was selected by the Christchurch Art Gallery in 2019 to activate its auditorium space for an event that coincided with Matariki, the Māori New Year. In Māori mythology, *Te Toi-o-ngā-rangi* is the uppermost of the twelve heavens and the most sacred of them all.<sup>20</sup> By transforming an architectural interior into an experiential journey through the twelve heavens of Māori legend, visitors are able to witness what architectural critic Anthony Vidler refers to as “a moment too brief to inhabit – except in imagination,”<sup>21</sup> and engage what Lebbeus Woods refers to as the “narratives of history [and] the signs and symbols [that give] social existence agreed-upon meanings.”<sup>22</sup>

As Taylor, Preston and Charleson reflect in their article “The Myth of the Matter: Parallel Surfaces of Seismic Linings”:

*It is necessary to understand myth not as fable, fiction, or illusion but rather in its original sense as that which is the most real. In this sense myth, unlike history with its necessary intellectual detachment from matters in the present, is a living presence supplying models for human behaviour and, by that very fact, giving meaning and value to life. “It is the eternal present of the mythical event that makes possible the profane duration of historical events.”*<sup>23,24</sup>

18. Daniel K. Brown, *Edge of the Universe*, LUX Light Festival, Wellington, May 18–27, 2018, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=4840> and LUMA Southern Light Project, Queenstown Botanical Gardens, Queenstown, June 2–5, 2017, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=4880>.

19. Daniel K. Brown, *Te Toi-o-ngā-rangi*, Light Boxes Wellington, Vivian Street, Wellington, from January 27, 2020, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=5052>; Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, May 24, 2019, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=5026>; HighLight Carnival of Lights, Hutt City Events Centre, October 25–28, 2019, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=5156>; LUMA Southern Light Project, Queenstown Botanical Gardens, June 1–4, 2018, <http://www.danielkbrown.com/?p=4983>.

20. Elsdon Best, “Māori Religion and Mythology Part 1,” <https://viewer.waiteo.victoria.ac.nz/client/search/any/any?q=Maori%20Religion%20and%20Mythology%20Part%201>.

21. Anthony Vidler and Lebbeus Woods, *The Storm and the Fall* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2004), <https://www.zdor.ee/transportation/engineering/82052-the-storm-and-the-fall-lebbeus-woods-epub-download.html>.

22. Lebbeus Woods, “AS IT IS: Interview with LW 2.”

23. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 2.

24. Mark Taylor, Julieanna Preston, and Andrew Charleson, “The Myth of the Matter: Parallel Surfaces of Seismic Linings” in *Re-Framing Architecture: Theory, Science and Myth* (Sydney: Arcadia Press, 2000), 189.

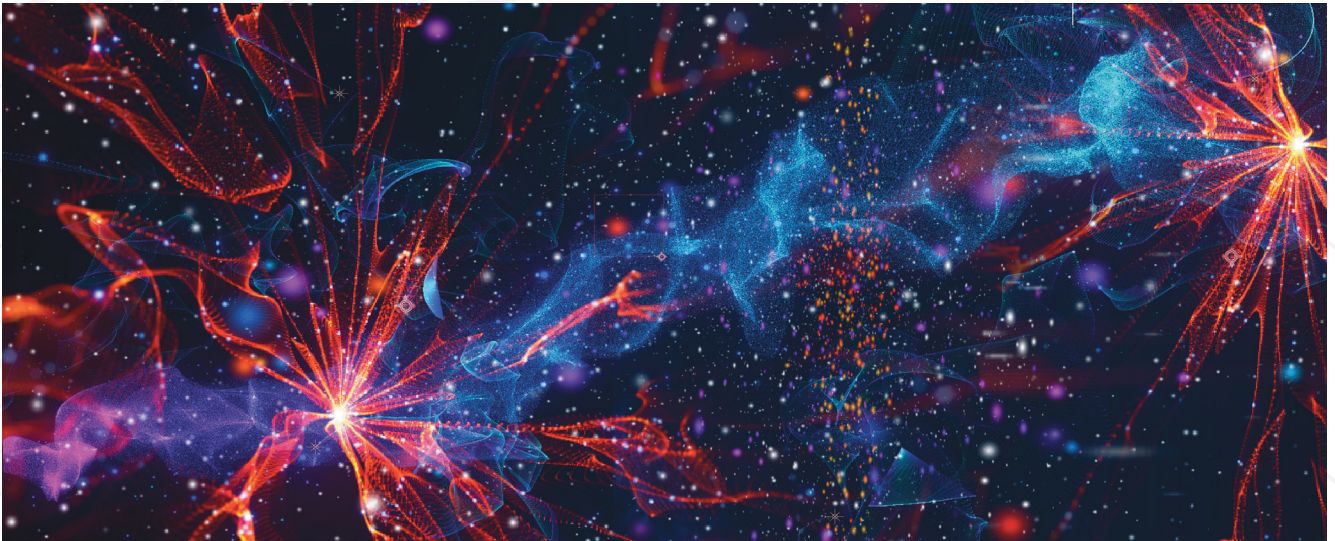


Figure 5. Daniel K. Brown, *Te Toi-o-ngā-rangi*, Christchurch Art Gallery, Christchurch, May 24, 2019.

## Conclusion

This paper reflects on a body of research conducted over a fifteen-year period that examines how contextualised speculative interventions can renew place identity by reawakening a site's lost essential narratives. The research from 2005–2010 was conducted primarily in Rome, while the research from 2010–2020 was conducted primarily in New Zealand. The work in Rome was based on cultural mythologies that are universally known, while the work in New Zealand drew from 'unknown' stories arising primarily from unique stories implied by an architectural context. Both approaches received similar reactions by the community and similar professional critique: the audience experienced a site as a new realm that made them feel a strong connection to the place.

When strategically curated within an architectural context, speculative architectural installations can enable us to experience the 'eternal present of the mythical event.' They can provide a critical pathway for positioning and testing non-traditional architectural design research outcomes that are experiential, situated in the public realm, and capable of imparting cultural and heritage memory to contemporary audiences. Non-traditional architectural research in the form of speculative creative installation provides the opportunity to reach a much

wider public audience than traditional academic scholarly methods. Through community-based and collaborative creative practice, such architectural research can critically explore – and help to mediate and mitigate – seemingly intractable contemporary architectural problems such as the cultural, heritage and place identity of our evolving built environments.

*We shall not cease from exploration*

*And the end of all our exploring*

*Will be to arrive where we started*

*And know the place for the first time.*

*Through the unknown, unremembered gate*

*When the last of earth left to discover*

*Is that which was the beginning*<sup>25</sup>

T. S. Eliot

25. T. S. Eliot, "Little Gidding," in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber, 1958) V, lines 26–32.



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