If walls could talk...

Jessica Kleinerman

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If Walls Could Talk...
Subtitle: Revelation

by
Jessica Lauren Kleinerman

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I, Jessica Kleinerman, prefer to be contacted each time a request for production is made. I can be reached at the following address:

Jessica Kleinerman
52 Churchill Road
Hamden, CT 06517
(203) 281-0347
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Fig. 2. Brandywine Museum Wall c. 1700's Chadd's Ford, PA
Information

What's in a wall? Raw materials, of course, and also function, technology, skill, history, and culture are present in a wall. An ancient wall speaks to those willing to ferret out its story, a kind of diary of its history and of the people who built it and used it.

Fig. 3. Servian Wall, Italy  B.C. 390

I have always found walls appealing. Long before I was entranced by the information they contain, I was attracted by surface pattern and the appearance of strength and age. Years ago, for instance, on a walking trip along Hadrian's Wall in the north of England, I was impressed by how many centuries the old Roman boundary marker had existed and how long it was; but I didn't appreciate the details of its physical presence. However, after several years of studying ceramics, I had a greatly enhanced appreciation for the old walls I saw during a trip to China in the summer of 1996. I found myself fascinated not only by their beauty but by the knowledge and skill of the ancient builders whose work has stood for 2,000 years.

And yet, as I traveled around and examined those ancient Chinese walls, I saw
signs of decay and instability—to the point that I became quite interested in walls that have broken down past the point of usefulness or are being used in a way other than their original purpose. Sometimes walls had been deliberately ransacked for their raw material and had become dwellings or other structures. In many places where walls had stood successfully for centuries, lack of maintenance and interest seemed to be making inroads on these symbols of strength and invincibility.

![Image of the Ruins of Jinshanling, The Great Wall of China, 1995.](image)

Walls are storehouses of information about the cultures that built them, information about such practical matters as technology, materials, and the degree of skill of the artisans whose hands gave them shape. In addition, there are sociological matters to explore—how civilizations were affected by the walls they built, for example, and how well walls served the purposes for which they were intended. Had a wall facilitated trade or hindered it, sequestered a society or extended its boundaries, provided shelter and protection or been felled by earthquake or conqueror. Had a wall built for protection from predators or nature been merely gruffly utilitarian or provided with pattern and color. These pieces of information
about walls can speak volumes about the people whose lives were spent building them, living with them, dying beside them. A rude sheep enclosure tells us a story quite different from the elegant decorated wall of a place of worship, not only in terms of design and materials, but in its level of preservation. A well preserved animal enclosure may tell us that its function still serves, while a crumbling, ruined monastery wall may tell the tale of a potent religious power's fall from grace. Reading walls and their remnants can be as rewarding as reading old journals about how people lived, how problems were solved, how technical advancements were made. Sometimes we find that an ancient civilization's approach to their wall building used techniques that are still in use today. Other times we find that walls that didn't serve their purpose affected the course of history. The Great Wall of China, built for repelling invaders, failed utterly at that, but unified a people, and facilitated the development of the Silk Route, which in turn affected the course of Chinese history.

Last summer, traveling and studying ceramics in China, unable to speak the language, confronted at every turn with strange food, customs and lifestyle and with a very different appearance than the people I was among, I longed for something I could find in common with my own American life. Almost everything on a visual level seemed non-familiar; however, I realized that walls were something our cultures had in common. Growing up in New England, I was used to stone walls lining every country road for miles. Although very different in form and function than most of their Chinese counterparts, they were walls. And some of them had been around for centuries. The brick walls at Yale University, where I walked frequently as a child, made me feel as if I was connected to history; they seemed so old to me.
But in China, I gained a deeper feeling for old walls. They were truly awe-inspiring in their antiquity, beauty, and diversity. Sometimes I had views of entire walled towns with their brick houses and structures that have remained unchanged for a thousand years. Frequently, I saw walls and individual buildings that had been standing longer than that. Studying ceramics and visiting old kiln sites, I found a new and more personalized respect for these walls and their creators. Who handled the clay and fired the brick, were they skillful, was the wall still in good condition centuries after it had been built, had a beautiful wall been broken and then repaired or left to fall apart? All those centuries of people living with those walls, and yet, when I saw a ruined wall I thought, "All that accumulated raw material, skill, labour, and design it took to build that big, imposing wall - if nobody takes care of it - it can fall to pieces!" If people haven't learned the skills or lack the will or expertise to repair their walls, then that's the end of them. It was not until I returned home that I realized what the significance of those old crumbling walls would be to me.

Fig. 5. Narrow stairway down to the entrance of a Yao kiln, China.
Realization

According to Spiro Kostoff in his book, *A History of Architecture*, "To chart a place on earth—that is the supreme effort of the built environment in antiquity. Shelter, of course, always takes prescience. But its issue transcends self-preservation and comfort. Shelter engages human alliances and rank, and so it becomes the task of residential architecture to advance the pattern of collective existence. From family to empire, the stages of social and political gradation effect the scope and intricacy of this extendible pattern. But in the end organization only tidies up; it cannot satisfy darker anxieties of being afloat in a mysterious design which is not of our own making. To mediate between cosmos and policy, to give shape to fear and exercise it, to effect a reconciliation of knowledge and the unknowable, that was the charge of ancient architecture."

I was in China, unable to communicate, only to look around and think about what I was seeing. I stared at an ancient Ming Dynasty wall at the side of a very narrow street in the old section of the ceramics-producing city of Jingdezhen where I had come to study for a month. Smooth cobblestones lay underfoot, tall old houses were packed tightly on either side, each of which had a set of two steps that led to the front door. The feeling of antiquity and connection to history was similar to my reaction when I saw the 250 year old houses in Elfreth's Alley in Philadelphia. I wanted to share my thoughts with somebody, but my companions didn't speak English. The wall I was looking at was three stories high and I could see that it was two layers thick because it was missing a section that had fallen to the ground in rubble. As I was taking a picture of this, a Chinese student asked me why I was interested in this "mess." In his best English, he explained that the houses dated from the Ming Dynasty and that the two layers of brick helped keep them cool in the summer and warm in the winter. I thought it would be an impossible feat to keep anything cool in Jingdezhen's summer; it was, by far, the hottest place I'd ever been
in my life. The sweltering heat of an early summer morning in southern China is no relief from the furnace of the previous day's afternoon; and there never seems to be enough of a breeze.

Fig. 6. Ming Dynasty house, falling apart, 1996.

We walked around to the front of the house; the student spoke to the owner and in a few minutes we were invited in for a better look. Inside, to my great surprise, the house was as cool as if there were central air conditioning. The bricks felt cold and wet. Looking around quickly, so as not to offend by staring, I saw two posters prominently displayed on a wall. The first one was a colorful illustration of "The Great Handshake" between Stalin and Mao, the two former powerful Communist leaders. Next to it was another colorful poster of a Western-styled Asian woman in a bikini, advertising the ubiquitous Jinebau soda. These modern additions to the wall added a few words to an old story; the house was built in the fourteenth century and had been continuously occupied by thirteen generations of the same family.
Set to thinking about a family's connection with history in the walls of its ancient dwelling, I realized that all the walls I'd seen and in which I'd felt a sense of history, actually had a story to tell me. Contemplating the work of the ancient brick makers gave me the idea that I could construct my own representation of an ancient wall as a way of understanding the history of the ones I'd seen in China. In this way, I would examine the make up of the very bricks themselves, discovering personally the size, the composition, the color, the stacking design, the repetitious labor that went into constructing a wall.

The ancient masons who built those old wall taught their skills to their descendants who in turn passed the information on to theirs, adding their own observations and new technology. Contemplating this, I came to think of walls as a metaphor for mankind's body of knowledge itself. As walls are built from the ground
up, basic building block by basic building block and finally are an accumulation of many parts in an organized structure, so a body of knowledge grows. Bits of information and ideas accumulating over the centuries have produced a huge storehouse of knowledge that mankind has at its disposal; and I felt that like walls, mankind’s wealth of knowledge is vulnerable to the forces of neglect, disaster or decree.

Fig. 8. Roman wall of Tarragona, 100AD.
As I worked on my wall, though, I realized that all those old, strong walls, built so diligently many centuries ago, were not only composed of raw materials, but of ideas and expertise and of the technology of their times, as well as of cultural, geographical and historical reference.

Fig. 9. Revelation, at the Bevier Gallery, RIT, May, 1997.

The rubble I'd seen at the foot of broken walls seemed to be crumbs of abandoned wisdom. I realized that my wall was no longer a just a representation of an ancient wall and that its bricks were no longer mere bricks, but parallels to building blocks of information. My work, Revelation, would be a sculptural metaphor, my personal interpretation of that theme.
Process

Revelation

To communicate my ideas I needed to actually create a wall as a metaphor for knowledge. I decided to use a bottle form to represent myself. By placing it within the confines of a protective arch, I would demonstrate my place in the world, beneficiary and observer of the progress of knowledge.

Fig. 10. Revelation, in progress, April, 1997.
Historical References

In considering my theme, I thought about the many functions of walls—as shelter from the elements, as protection against invaders, to demonstrate power, to mark boundaries. The following examples are among those I studied as I contemplated the design of my own wall.

Hadrian's Wall, still standing today, was built by the army of the Roman Emperor Hadrian in about 117 A.D. to mark the northern extent of the Roman Empire and to separate it from Caledonia, which is present-day Scotland. A relatively low wall, it probably once had sentinel posts at intervals; besides the wall itself, there are stone remnants of some structures along its length, which spans the width of England.

Another ancient boundary wall which still stands today, but which had the additional purpose to repel invaders, is the Great Wall of China. Quite possibly the world's most imposing structure, it was built over a period of about 3,000 years and is about 2,000 miles long, running from Tun-Hunang in the northwest to the Yellow Sea in the east. The span of time over which the wall was built means that it presents a history of varied building techniques and styles; and its length demonstrates a diversity of materials depending on local sources. Originally meant to keep out the Mongolian invaders from the north, it failed to fulfill this purpose; but it did serve to delineate portions of the all-important Silk Route and served as a communications link from one end of the empire to the other, thus functioning as a political tool. But what emperors built, twentieth century politicians took away. In modern times, part of the wall was dismantled by government decree. Considered a waste of precious building material, whole sections were carted away to be used for more practical purposes.
Serving to unify an empire, as the great Wall did, but built to fulfill an entirely different specific function, was the highly advanced water distribution system created by the Romans in the first century B.C. The first organized attempt by an empire to create a plumbing system, the Roman Aqueducts spanned thousands of miles and nine countries. Built out of local materials, usually stones.
or brick-faced concrete, series of arches, stacked in tiers to obtain the needed height, passed over existing towns and natural features of the landscape. Many remnants of this impressive aqueduct system still exist all over Europe, some serving as parts of present day buildings and bridges.

"Too massive and too practical to have been toppled by the Goths and the Vandals..." a stone aqueduct still carries water over the streets of Segovia, Spain. (11)
Another purpose of ancient walls was in service to a civilization's religion.

The Imhotep Pyramid in Memphis, tomb of King Zoser, is the oldest stone structure in Egypt, dating from the Third Dynasty, about 2680 B.C. Three waves of construction were needed to complete the massive stone, clay and wood structure, which stands 1800 feet wide and 900 feet tall. Its height brought it closer to Re, the sun god, and served as a daily reminder of man's relationship to the gods.

Fig. 14. Imhotep Pyramid, Egypt.
On the other side of the world the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan in Mexico was built by the Aztecs in the first century B.C. This religious structure was constructed in the Neolithic technique, earth faced with stone slabs set into clay, and has a ceremonial platform that sits where the sun sets on summer solstice, thus connecting it and its believers to the larger universe.
The public audience hall at the Palace of Shapur the First at Ctesiphon, Iran, built in 250 A.D., was the first structure in the Persian world to employ a complicated system of arch and barrel vaulting for a large-scale building. The outer facade supporting and surrounding the audience hall employed a design of horizontal blind arcades with pointed arches which became a standard for Persian architectural design for the next thousand years. An earthquake in 1880, after this photograph was made, destroyed the right section.

Fig. 16. The public hall at the Palace of Shapur I, Iran. Photo taken in 1880.
The Richmond Peel, in Richmond, Virginia, completed in 1971 by the Site architectural design firm, was a modification to an existing department store. The adhesive bond mortar, used to veneer bricks to the face of the building, was so strong that it allowed the architects to design a facade in which the bricks peel away from the side without other support. The designers had sought to "find a juxtaposition of routine utility with visual ambiguity." In this case, new technology permitted a departure from traditional brick-laying technique.

Fig. 17. The Richmond Peel, by SITE Group
Ron Fondaw is a contemporary artisan who uses adobe and other found materials in constructing wall as sculpture. His work "Mygon", among others was featured in Ceramics Monthly, March of 1997. "Mygon", made from commercially produced adobe blocks, deals with the "ideas that permanence is a relative term. He describes his recent works as 'very ephemeral. They could last three weeks, six months, or a year'.

Fig. 18 Ron Fondaw's work, "Mygon" 1996.
Louise Nevelson for many years dealt with issues of space and environment. In her 1959 show at the Grand Central Moderns in New York, she used black paint on wooden box collages, to get a feeling she says of, “A dark place of dreams and loneliness.”

Edward Albee, curator of the show, said that her two trips to the Mayan ruins at pre-Columbian sites in the Yucatan peninsula of Central America has had a large impact on her work; and her four-sided columns with low reliefs has “striking visual similarities” to the ruins.

Fig. 19. Louise Nevelson’s “Sky Cathedral” 1958.
Andy Goldsworthy’s “The Wall”, came about by a generous land gift from the Buccleuch Estates in England. One stipulation of the deed was that he construct a dividing wall to separate the neighboring land. He said, “I have made a give- and- take wall between the farmer and myself. Two sheep folds are incorporated into the wall: one opening on the farmer’s side for sheep, one opening on my side for sculpture. The sheep will in effect be on my land and the sculpture on the farmer’s.”

Fig. 20. Andy Goldsworthy’s “The Wall” 1988.
Explanation of Terms

My piece of artwork is of human scale because it functions within our normal scale of existence. It can evoke emotions which we only get from actually being in a particular location. I chose to make my piece human scale because I wanted my viewers to experience what I was saying.

Walls have many functions, and people build them for different reasons. Walls are built for shelter, security, separation, they are also used as boundaries and as support structures. Walls are used to separate territory as being separate from others. This creates personal space and to delineate group spaces as well as political territories. Walls are used to support larger structures. Walls can act as a route marker that can serve as a system of communication

Arches are a safe place because of their structural integrity. They also appear to envelope space or objects. Important objects are often inset into arches or a niche in the wall.

Fig. 21. The remains of the Fortuna Annonaria House, Italy.

A bottle is a symbol of containment. Historically it has been used to represent potential, growth, and youth.

Bricks are the building blocks of human civilization. They can be made of chunks of earth, cut sections of rock, or unfired and fired clay; there are many ways to make bricks. Each culture develops its own method of brickmaking depending on local resources, needs, and climate.
Artist Statement

This is not an old Chinese wall; this is not a South American boundary marker. This is a sculpture that represents what old walls mean to me. This wall is a metaphor for knowledge which is being lost. Deteriorating strength is the essence of this piece.

With the use of video I show modern technology juxtaposed with the loss of ancient wisdom. The deterioration of my bricks into rubble and dust is a part of the evolution of my sculpture. The bottle, representing a symbolic ideal of myself, signifies containment; its white color relates the purity of my thoughts; porcelain represents my feminine strength. The arch, a protective niche, is a place of safety and sanctuary from which to explore.

Last summer, when I was in China, I had an important revelation. I was in awe as my train inched by an old, remote town of hundreds of ancient brick buildings. With the exception of the train and my camera I could have been back in the twelfth century. These ancient walls, layers of intensive work, are falling into disrepair; their purpose will eventually be lost. I realized that knowledge, like layers of accumulated information can, without care and attention, break down, and eventually become meaningless.

Fig. 22. Ruins of the Central Baths in Italy.
In building my wall, I used a traditional stacking technique in wall building, a soldier course, which has been used to increase stability in a wall. This mimics how real walls are built. It is a brick pattern where every five to seven rows, a row of bricks are set perpendicular to normal.

The bottle form representing myself, which I selected for its anthropomorphic qualities, was built from grolleg porcelain. The qualities of the clay itself would convey strength, and its white color, purity. I had chosen to handbuild the bottle so that it would contain a sense of life.

![Fig. 23. Revelation (detail) May, 1997.](image)

In the beginning I incorporated female anatomy into my forms, but I stopped because they were drawing attention to physical features, which was distracting. After researching other figural shapes such as those in Brancusi sculptures, Cycladic figures, and goddess representations of various cultures, I started working with the top part of the body and I concentrated on the shoulder section. At this point I started having more success in the overall feeling of the bottle and a more simple form helped me communicate my ideas more effectively.
The unglazed, white surface created a beautiful contrast with the rough, crumbly bricks which would surround the bottle. I touched only a small part of the bottle so there were very few handling marks. I let gravity form and hold the bottle until I could fire it.

Fig. 24. Test Wall, November, 1996.

I projected video onto the bottle to give it life in the wall. I recorded myself talking about the piece and my inspirations. It was projected onto the white surface of the bottle to make the bottle more alive, and so I could personally explain the revelation that I had. The video brings the bottle to life with audio; and visuals of my face projected on the central part of the bottle narrowed the possible readings of the piece, and increased the effectiveness of my communication.
My bricks had to perform certain functions. They had to be light weight, and their size had to be a non-standard. Because I needed to use more than 2,700 pounds of clay, I decided to invest in a cement mixer.

I used four breakaway, wood molds for press molding the bricks. This allowed me to make uniform shapes relatively quickly. The molds also functioned as a way to move the wet bricks onto ware carts.

For the main stock of bricks I used a 12”x3”x2” size and for the smaller bricks, 10”x5”x2” were used. When building a wall, a soldier course must be used for structural integrity. This when the pattern of assembly calls for the row of bricks to be placed 90 degrees to the prior course. This prevents the bricks from cracking due to the weight of the bricks above it. Although my bricks were not load bearing, I intended to create the illusion that it could be, so the soldier courses were important. I also produced bricks 5” x 5” x 2”, which was a half brick, and a 2.5” x 2” x 2” which created the arch.

My recipe for bricks changed slightly with every load, I utilized many contaminated, unknown, or found clays as fillers and as colorants. This is consistent with primitive brick making techniques.

One of the main issues that I faced when making the bricks is that I needed them to be much lighter in weight than “normal” weight bearing bricks. To accomplish that, I used many combustibles in the mix that fired out and made a much more porous brick. My fired bricks weighed about half as much as commercial bricks. I also needed my bricks to be “old” looking, and so when they crumbled, I was able to use them as rubble.
My final (of four) recipes was:

20% Hawthorn Fire Clay
20% Stoneware Clay
20% Portland/Rochester Cement
10% Sawdust (medium)
10% Cut Straw
10% Vermiculite
10% Local Clay-Filler Clay

Fig. 25. Revelation, (brick detail) May, 1997

Kaolin does not work in this clay body because it defloculates the clay and makes it unusable for pressing into molds.

I added some filler clays in 10% quantities to some of the mixes. Some examples are Barnard, Jordan, Red Art, Alberta. I also added colorants such as Rutile, Yellow Ochre, Manganese, Red and black Iron Oxides.

The bricks were fired between cones 06-03. Many times I stacked the kiln to allow the flame path to develop inside a column of bricks. This created a fluxed surface on some of the bricks. This was very effective way to get a dark, hard surface, which was unlike the rest of the brick, which was crumbly and crunchy.
The bottle that I used to represent myself was made out of porcelain, primarily tile #6 kaolin and nepheline syenite. By firing the vessels to cone nine oxidation, I was able to make the surface warm and soft. This enabled me to get an almost self-glazed effect on the bare porcelain. After I set up the freestanding arch and sized it accordingly, I was able fit the bottle snugly in, compensating for it’s 14% shrinkage.

I used 13 bricks in the arch to span a foot and a half space. My arch, freestanding, contained no mortar and was two layers deep and two layers thick, creating a recessed space to put the bottle in.

Fig. 26. Revelation, in progress with artist, April, 1997.
Infrastructure/installation

When I decided that I needed my piece to be eight feet tall, I had to consider different installation alternatives. Initially I intended to build a solid wall, but upon further consideration of stability and cost, I decided to veneer a prefabricated infrastructure. These would be movable and would allow me to build most of the wall before installing it.

I used 4 sheets of 3/4" Plywood, and 20, 2"X4"X8' pieces to build two walls that were 4'X8'X1.5'. The two sections met at an eighty five degree angle, giving the wall more stability. The walls were free standing. After figuring the height and width of the arch, I cut out a section of the wall to allow the arch to be built into the wall. I waited until the walls were in place in the gallery before installing the arch. The top right hand portion of the wall was cut to show deterioration, but this also lowered the center of gravity, making the piece more stable. I used colored mortar between the bricks, and a liquid adhesive to bond the bricks to the under structure. The bottom two rows of bricks were stacked without mortar, so that they could be removed for the installation and replaced when the piece was in location.

Fig. 27 Revelation, (side view), May, 1997.
To move the walls individually, I had two dollies made out of steel, 4'X2' with four large wheels bolted underneath. It took five strong people to lower the sections onto the dolly. The sections rested on their narrow sides. It was easily rolled into the gallery where it was set upright and shifted into position.

After the placement in the gallery had been figured out, I bricked in the bottom and sides, and stacked the arch bricks. I placed the bottle, and brought in the rubble for the bottom to complete the installation.

Video

I produced a three minute video and made a half hour loop tape to play inside the gallery. Before the taping, I had to script a monologue, choose a style, and adjust the lighting, and the size of my image. I used a Sony video recorder to record my piece, as well as two Tungeston balanced lights.

I used a "Smart Cart" video equipment system, which is primarily used for bringing advanced technical support to the professors in the classroom, to project my video onto the bottle during the opening. Because this system was so advanced, it was in high demand, and so I was only able to use it during the opening. Renting a system like this would cost about 100 dollars a day.

My alternative was to connect my VCR up to a "Panel Book," which connects to an overhead projector and projects video. It is not an effective system. The bulb is too dim and also creates a great deal of heat, plus the unit had to be too close to the sculpture itself. I did not use this system for most of the show and so the piece was without video for much of its duration.

One problem with the "Smart Cart" set-up is that the unit is about four feet by three by two feet which is bulky for a gallery setting. A ceiling mounted projection video camera would be the best solution for a permanent installation or for future pieces of this nature.
Conclusion

When I set out to do this piece I did not imagine the enormity of my concept, or the amount of labor and artistic growth that it would require. I successfully solved many problems from brick formulations through transportation and installation issues. I feel my completed piece was a triumph for me as an artist.

This year was the start of a whole new way of expressing myself. During my time working here, I now know what I want to accomplish in my life. I've learned about the relationship between myself and art. I had a revelation in the way that I think and in the way that I communicate. My piece, Revelation, is the start of my career as an artist.

Fig. 28. Excavated bath, in Bath, England. 1982.
Works Cited