Rethinking the Urban Memorial

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ABSTRACT: This paper investigates the use of new media for commemoration of significant events via the creative use of community archive in public spaces. In particular, it focuses on the 75th anniversary commemoration of a traumatic civilian incident in Bethnal Green, London, relating urban infrastructure and the loss and trauma caused to a great number of civilians in 1943. The Bethnal Green Memorial, a physical structure, and two media experiences, a projection and an audio trail, are explored through site observations and related literature. This paper critically reflects on digital experiences for heritage, the importance of anchoring them on the actual sites and creating space for participation.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the digital turn there has been a significant effort documenting people' stories that have never been told or that have been told only in a fragmentary way at a local level. Community heritage involving local organizations and individuals on a voluntary basis has been gradually gaining more social and cultural value. This has been manifested in a series of smaller scale projects and collaborations across different parties involving local stakeholders in inventive forms of coproduction and outreach. In the digital turn, people stories as people's memories take all possible forms of digital production with the advent of the archive both as visual and audio. In a digital and participatory turn we co-create collections of personal stories and we are invited to enrich existing ones held by traditional institutions. In our times we are obsessed with documenting everything in digital format. And it's in the nature of digital formats that everything is meant to be shareable [13].

Digital technologies have long served as memory tools, from photography, to video and newer experimentations. Inscribing new layers of information or interpretation we repurpose memories without substituting past forms, allowing the interplay of imagination [13]. In the process of heritage, its complexity and dependence to temporality and interpretation has allowed the inclusion of further intangible layers resulting from the interaction of people over time [6]. Many of these activities are seen as building upon motivation of former projects [3], with the addition of new technologies that give rise to novel types of exploration. Whether analog or digital, we experience an unprecedented mix of modes and practices.

2. BACKGROUND

These experimentations have been adopted in particular on sites that have been related to trauma. And in the participatory turn personal stories, objects, archives via personal commemoration practices in a connected and shared world can build a collective experience about a shared trauma [13]. In 'The September 11 Digital Archive' project an online platform, with the support of new media, introduced an archiving process for collective preservation and presentation of varied material that narrate both from the media and the public perspective facts and views about the attack that took place on 11 September 2011 in New York [12]. In 'The Rosewood Heritage Project' with the use of GIS, virtual reconstructions of a vanished landscape and use of various tools and methods for digital storytelling, a spatial template is introduced to talk about what the principal researcher defines as 'difficult heritage' relating a particular incident that affected Rosewood relating to racial inequality [5].

'The Last Goodbye' by Gabo Arora and Ari Palitz, is a Virtual Reality documentary telling

the first person story of a survivor of the Holocaust, bringing the viewer inside a concentration camp in Poland. Subsequent projects have seen student experimentations with Augmented Reality and digital storytelling supported by NYMedia Lab, where, with the use of mobile devices and image tracking students were invited to tell the story of a 'crucial moment, event or movement' in 1968. [11]. In the case of London #LondonUnited is the installation in the City Hall in 2018 to remember the victims of the terrorist attacks in London in 2017 [10]. A signing book invited people to tweet and share their messages via the use of the hashtag. Messages were displayed on screens inside the City Hall. The same messages were also projected onto a map of London on the floor, using geo-location data.

This paper focuses on a projection and an audio trail that have been produced to commemorate the civilian loss during an incident in Bethnal Green Station. One would argue about these basic and more traditional ways of using digital tools. However, the mix of practices relating material form, personal digital archive and audio narratives through complementary outputs gives an interesting hybrid of remembrance.

2.1 ABOUT THE MEMORIAL

The physical memorial takes its name from the location where the incident took place, the Bethnal Green tube station, in East London. It is dedicated to the 173 civilians who lost their lives primarily by being suffocated in a domino fall on the steps of this urban infrastructure during an air raid call. The Bethnal Green tube station due to its great depth, served during the war years as a refuge for local people during air rides. The Bethnal Green incident is said to be one of the most severe civilian disasters during World War II, although for many years it was not communicated widely to the public [1]. That is what makes the actual monument and its supporting ways of commemoration of significant social, political but also emotional value, since according to witnesses, people at the time had been instructed to keep silent [1].

The actual new memorial was installed in November 2017 replacing the previous smaller plaque. The final installation consists of a concrete trunk which supports a wooden canopy in the shape of a reversed staircase.

The memorial was conceived as a reversed miniature of the staircase, suspended via a concrete structure, in the vicinity of the actual staircase, 3,5metres away sitting within the border of the park. The names of the victims are engraved on its surfaces. The same number, representing the 173 victims is introduced to the light cones of the canopy as well [1].

In March 2018 a double projection marked the 75th commemoration of the incident. To realise the projection the charity launched an open call for crowdfunding via Spacehive, the UK online crowdfunding platform for projects related to making places. An alliance of academics, survivors, victims' families and other parties along with the local Council supported throughout the process, making the call to meet its funding target to make the projection feasible.

From its initial conception and throughout the phases of delivery the memorial project seems to have been conceived as a process of 'facilitating meaningful engagement with local heritage for a wide range of people' [2]. This has been carried out through various means: a travelling exhibition, a booklet publication hand in to events, various opportunities for presentations, a dedicated website and the latest outputs as two audio trails, one for adults and one for children, and a double projection onto the structure.

2.2 ACTIVATION VIA PROJECTION AND AUDIO TRAIL

The projection for the 75th anniversary commemoration ran for a week between 3rd and 9th March 2018, during late afternoon hours. One projector was placed outdoors within the
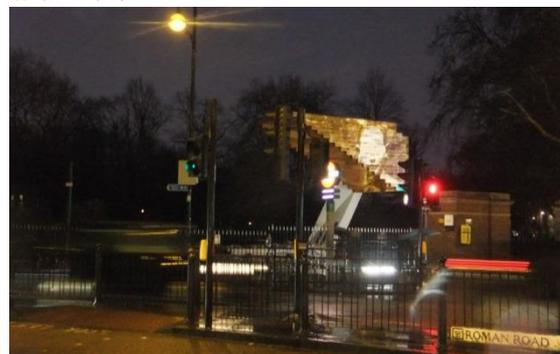

Figure 1:Bethnal Green Memorial_75th anniversary commemoration with a double projection

Bethnal Green park area and the second located indoors on the first floor of a residence across the street, projecting via the window. The audio trails, two separate outputs from previous work, have been made available as downloadable tracks with a sign installed on the railings of the park nearby the memorial.

The projection consisted of two loops of images as photographic archive. All photographs include victims of the incident commemorated here, taken as individual or group portraits, with daily life activities also depicted. Most photographs are black and white with few in colour.

Two audio trails have been produced one for adults and one for children. The adult trail introduces a narrator who unfolds the story of the incident and some key facts that relate the incident to its location and its past social life. The narration includes quotes from interviews with survivors or victims' relatives. The duration of the audio is approximately 32 minutes. It is structured as an experience that a participant could take outdoors to the park by following the indicated number of steps and directionality.

2.3 DISCUSSION

Working with digital tools and platforms has been argued to facilitate communicating 'difficult heritage' and engaging with a wider public [5]. Spatial representations have been extremely popular in constructing and reconstructing environments to complement personal testimonies and narratives, in an effort to create more affective experiences, to narrate a crucial event [5] and further experiment with digital storytelling [11]. Spatiality is incorporated or implied in most of these experiences. However, there is a growing interest to annotate the real environment with digital layers in situ at the actual locations. Whilst new promising technologies like Augmented Reality still have technical challenges to overcome to create better flow of experience and immersion [8, 9] more low tech experiences such as projection and audio trails are still effective and quite popular.

As architectural structures and monuments are no longer seen as just fixed realities [7] that brings a case to think, as in the case of the Bethal Green Memorial 75th anniversary commemoration, their mediation with people's stories via the use of digital technologies. As it is argued it is with digital processes that we continually reshape and renegotiate our socio-cultural practices [13].

In the case of the Bethnal Green projection, its content consists of a series of photographs, all as individual or group portraits, images of a past time depicting the victims in their ordinary lives or in staged portraits. It keeps it very focused and consistent to the people who lost their lives. As per previous research [9] using a photograph that depicts human presence or activity, is a more emotive and social image that in a contested and overloaded outdoor space gives the viewer something more human to respond to. Creating sensorial experiences, the two different outputs prioritize one sense per experience, the sight and the sound. But what makes it more powerful is the participatory aspect of building something collective as an archive that can be immediately transmitted to the unaware passer-by. For what van Dijck [13] calls mediated memories, Peddrochi talks about 'complementing them with sensitivity, in stimulating and regulating people's memories and emotions' [4]. Creating affective experiences is thus a dynamic process that calls for involvement and mediation.

In the digital and participatory turn, how we design and curate collective experiences brings both opportunities and challenges. The Bethnal Green Memorial project has been presented here through its physical and digital materialisation in public space. Considering the design process, the digital annotations are anchored to the physical site. Thinking about digital mediations in heritage practices might require further critical reflection on how to refine its notion by considering the affective and social aspects of heritage.

3. CONCLUSION

This paper discussed the case of the Bethnal Green Memorial and its 75th anniversary commemoration as a double projection and an audio trail. The paper introduced early observations from the ongoing research on how digital and physical tools and interfaces can be creatively used to produce affective in situ experiences for community memories in public space. It forms part of a pilot study that aims to inform design practices of shared memory experiences. The paper presented how material-physical structures can be activated by digital layers. The possibilities of the latter

are infinite to the way new technologies allow coproduction and participation for collective storytelling. The digital annotation becomes a space for community participation and representation anchored , in the Bethnal Green Memorial case, in the actual physical site and facilitated by technology.

4. ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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