

Pre-workshop comment

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My own angle

I come to cultural memory from the field of visual culture, where I am particularly interested in contemporary art and architecture since the 1980s. Here I focus on cultural memory as the basis for artistic practice and the (artistic and public) engagement with the built environment. Site-specific installations, performances or community projects often work with and in some cases generate memory and sense of place. I am also interested in the production of nostalgia and selective memory inherent in the architectural project of gentrification and the interaction of artists with the (re)built environment. In some sense gentrification is 'cultural memory in the making'.

Where is cultural memory going?

Recently there has been a lot of interest in cultural memory and technology, which is doubtlessly a response to the rapid changes and developments in methods of archiving and recording. There is a plethora of new possibilities to capture the present for the future and to revive and retrieve, but also to alter and reinvent memories. The present popular obsession with documenting and archiving everything almost before it happens by means of blogs, facebook or twitter creates a whole new field of study for LCS scholars – again this is cultural memory in the making. Methods of analysing these new forms of text and archive in a fruitful manner are being developed but more work needs to be done.

a) The truth of memory: fact & fiction

This is, of course, particularly interesting in connection with twitter, facebook etc – history is no longer written by the victors in retrospective but by everyone all the time. There are now more facts and fictions than ever before. At the same time events are being transformed into memories almost instantaneously... Also see b)

b) Regimes of memory: spaces, texts, objects, bodies

Here again I am interested in buildings, in Bachelard's poetics of space and the idea of the house as container of and at the same time metaphor for memory. Any building, of course, is a construct of stories, of intentions and interpretations, of facts and fictions. I am interested in the urban maze and artworks that use psychogeographic strategies to decipher (and to some degree invent) the stories told by architects and urban planners and to read the various interpretations of those you have used the buildings and left their traces. How are buildings inscribed on people and how do people inscribe their own presence on buildings...

d) The politics and ethics of memory

Narrowing this huge field to the smaller focus of my research on current urban regeneration: here I am interested in decision processes in urban planning, such as which buildings will be demolished, which façades will be preserved (while the interior is hollowed out and entirely replaced by new structures), which houses will be renovated, which will be newly built, what architectural style will prevail, etc. These choices are of course not only about bricks and mortar but are really about the people. They are choices about whose story to tell and whose story to ignore or erase. The demolition of a 1960s council estate in favour of an office block or the conversion of a Victorian warehouse built on money from the slave trade into condos for high-income earners is about much more than reviving a degenerate or poor area. Who decides what is demolished and what is worth

restoring, ie whose memory is worth preserving? What are these decisions based on? Who is regeneration for? Etc.

Position paper

Cultural Memory and Urban Regeneration

My current research is concerned with art and architecture and with studying the contemporary city as site and generator of cultural production. In terms of 'remembering and forgetting' I am concerned with the ways cultural memory is created in the contemporary city, ie cultural memory in the making.

I am interested in how our urban surroundings affect the way space is perceived, in how decisions in town planning, degeneration, regeneration and the creation of new buildings and spaces affect the writing of history and the production/creation of memory.

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If we think about urban planning in general and about recent and current regeneration projects (in London and other cities such as Liverpool, Newcastle etc.) in particular we encounter a number of questions related to memory and to the politics and ethics of preserving, obscuring, denying or creating memory: Which buildings will be demolished? Which façades will be preserved (while the interior is hollowed out and entirely replaced by new structures)? Which houses will be renovated, which will be newly built, what architectural style will prevail? Etc.

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The architect Juhani Pallasmaa has noted: 'Buildings and cities are instruments and museums of time. They enable us to see and understand the passing of history, and to participate in time cycles that surpass individual life. Architecture connects us with the dead; through buildings we are able to imagine the bustle of the medieval street' (Pallasmaa, 52).

But we can't always see this imaginary past. We can see it in the dark shadows of an ancient house, or in a dark alleyway. But it is difficult to find it in the glass and mirror structures of new developments. To find this continuity of sense of place we need some guidance and help. Michel de Certeau, too, talks about the relationship of buildings to memory and to the past and points out the need for a narrative to root buildings in time and history. Without a narrative any building would be cold, soulless. But the narrative has to come naturally – it has to develop from the place itself and cannot be superimposed by historians and experts.

However, more often than not this is exactly what happens in regeneration projects, when a

particular version of 'history' is commodified and packaged as the 'heritage' of the area. In the case of London's East End and Docklands, which is the main focus of my current research, the restored façades of warehouses and the blue plaques and tourist trails present us with a huge out-door museum of a Dickensian 19th-century London. The heritage and nostalgia industries offer a sanitised version of the past that is safe to contemplate, and that has no implications for the present or the future. These externalised 'memories' leave us with isolated moments of history that obstruct any kind of natural cultural growth. The developers' narrow focus on the façades of the buildings excludes the story of the people who built them and who used them.

Certeau speaks about an exorcising of the ghosts of the past through the institutionalisation of 'national heritage', but not all the ghosts are exorcised that easily. Some buildings are beyond the homogenised version of blue plaque historicalisation. They don't fit the story. Not everything lends itself so easily to gentrification and even though great parts of London's East have been redeveloped, the old working class inhabitants have not all moved on. Often one only has to turn a street corner and one enters a different city and a different story.

Gentrification leads to a parallel narrative: the past is alive in the form of the unofficial ghosts of a continuing presence of those inhabitants whose existence jars with the story told by 'heritage'; it exists alongside a cleaned-up externalised or institutionalised and stagnated memory of the past – together they form a fragmented present rather than a coherent whole.

I now want to look at two art works that aim to go beyond the historicised façades to bring to life the ghosts of London's East: Janet Cardiff's sound walk around Whitechapel and Spitalfields 'The Missing Voice' from 1999; and 'The Wapping Audio Tour' by Elyssa Livergant, Matt Ball and Katie Day from 2006.

Both projects use binaural audio-recording to create a three-dimensional imaginary city which can be experienced through headphones while walking through the actual urban environment. Modelled on the genre of the detective story, the sound walks take the listener on a designated route which is led by the voice of a guide in search of lost memories and traces of the past. The technique of the recording allows you to experience the sounds spatially and creates a parallel universe.

In both audio tours, fact and fiction, remembered and invented memories, and past and present become entangled as archival sound recordings mix with recordings contemporary to the making of the artwork and actual sounds and noises of the city. The result is a multi-layered experience in which past and present co-exist and inform each other.

Cardiff's walk 'The Missing Voice' was created for the Whitechapel Library in 1999 and was supposed to run for only 3 months. But it is now owned by the Whitechapel Gallery and is still available to visitors. However, the area the original sound walk was made for has changed quite significantly over the past 10 years – some buildings or shops are no longer there while others have grown in their place. But this only strengthens the impression of the city as a polyphonic place of multiple layers and stories.

I would argue that Certeau's fragmented present can be experienced as a polyphonic and heterogeneous whole through artworks like Cardiff's 'The Missing Voice'. Cardiff uses many different sources of sound to create her stories. Some of the sounds are site-specific, some are from archives and from different places. She creates a palimpsest of stories and inscribes these into the urban environment of the walk.

'The Missing Voice' consists of the story of a fictional girl whose traces we are searching, the story of the woman who walks with us, Janet Cardiff's story of her residency in London, the captured traffic noises of 1999, archive material of site-specific sounds such as the sound of the blitz or the snippets from film noir movies, the actual noises of the city at the time we're doing the walk, our own memories and our own present perceptions – everything is layered and coming together in the experience of the walk.

Cardiff's many-layered stories evoke the traces of a fictional and a historical past, a personal history and a public history. Together all these traces of the past and the present open up what might otherwise be perceived as a fixed history of place.

Tim Edensor suggests that we must rid ourselves of the notion of an inheritable heritage if we want to engage constructively with the present, the past and the future: 'Refusing the false securities of a stable and linear past, such an approach celebrates heterogenous sensations and surprising associations, random connections, the ongoing construction of meaning, and also admits into its orbit the mysterious agency of artefacts, spaces and non-humans from the past. Such a rhizomic tactic permits lateral, contingent connections rather than the causal fixing of relationships between events, spaces, objects and people' (Edensor, 138).

Cardiff I would say is doing exactly this. Her work is a countermovement to gentrification in so far as she denies the commodified sanitised history we are being told by property developers and blue plaque historians. She tells us different histories of a specific place and mixes this with her own fiction and her own experiences, but most importantly she opens up space for our own experiences and memories and links the specific place with a wider sense of the history of urban life in general. For example the inclusion of sound snippets from film noir puts the East London alleyways into the wider context that goes beyond the narrow frame of the setting and includes the history of popular culture. Here memories of movies become memories of place and the East End is no longer just a part of London but also a part of a wider shared culture.

Though the work is, of course, the artist's work and represents her experiences and interpretations, her vision, her story, Cardiff does not claim ownership over place or time or even her own story. Her work denies the existence of a single fixed interpretation of past or present, of 'official' history. 'History' becomes our story – open to interpretation and in constant change.

Let us just have a quick look at the Wapping Audio Walk. The project is much narrower in scope than Cardiff's work. Though it includes several voices it mainly follows an old lady as she takes us through the Wapping of her youth, when the docks were still operating and the area had a thriving working class culture. We open doors where now there are walls, we watch men at work where now there are sculptures or monuments to their past. Overall the walk is steeped in nostalgia and subscribes to an uncritical and illusionary view of a golden past of close-knit communities of dock workers and their families. Unlike Cardiff's work it takes ownership of the place and its past. Even while it seeks to scratch the surface of the newly restored façades it reduces Wapping to the imaginary harmonious past of a 1950s white working class community at the expense of alternative experiences, interpretations and memories. It thus works as affirmation of the homogenous history told by the beautiful façades of gentrification and contributes to museumification rather than contesting it.

Cardiff's work on the other hand opens the urban space up by denying the notion of a single interpretation and acknowledging the city as a living and changeable organism. Perhaps her method of shared inclusive ownership over time, space, experience and memory of place can serve as a model for the architects and urban planners of regeneration projects. Regeneration or gentrification would then no longer seek to construct an exclusive homogenous vision of an area but acknowledge and integrate the polyphonic babble of the living city.