



The Heritage of Memorials and Commemorations — Twelfth Cambridge Heritage Seminar

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SEMINAR REVIEW

The Heritage of Memorials and Commemorations — Twelfth Cambridge Heritage Seminar

EMMA LOGIN

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The Heritage of Memorials and Commemorations was co-hosted by the University Of Cambridge Heritage Research Group and the Cultural Heritage and Reconstruction of Identity after Conflict (CRIC) Project. The conference aimed to bring together researchers and practitioners from a wide array of disciplines to explore issues of commemorative practice and memorial process.

The seminar was opened by Marie Louise Stig Sørensen. She introduced some very interesting issues concerning the social function of memorials, the intentionality behind commemoration, and their impact: do memorials inhibit a society's ability to move forward after a conflict? Do they prevent learning about its past? Is memorialization too exclusive and should contemporary memorials be more forward looking?

Session 1: Remembering war and its aftermath

The keynote speaker on the first day was Carl Bridge speaking on 'Australian memorials and attendant ceremonies from the Great War today'. Although his approach was very traditional and the material covered would have been familiar to many, it provided a solid and comfortable introduction to the seminar.

The second paper, 'Research, ritual and remembrance' was presented jointly by Martin Brown and Paula Filippucci. This gave a fascinating insight into the distinctive issues of memorialization which arise from the archaeological excavation of recent sites of conflict, particularly those associated with the discovery of human remains. It was very successful in demonstrating the power of conflict sites long after the event. Especially compelling was its demonstration of the importance of memorialization to those who have no first-hand experience of the conflict event itself:

in this case, the excavation team and the relatives of the soldier being excavated. Members of both were profoundly affected by the experience of recovering the body and felt the overriding need to carry out proper burial and memorialization.

This was followed by Gillian Carr's examination of the 'Memorialscape of occupation and liberation', a result of her ongoing research into the German occupation of the Channel Islands. For this she took both a landscape approach, exploring the geographic relationships between memorials, and a wider temporal approach tracing changing processes of memorialization over time.

The opening session concluded with Tomas Sniegon's assessment of 'Extermination camps as Holocaust museums'. This was interesting in introducing contemporary issues of memorialization, particularly the ways in which historical consciousness can affect views of the past, making memorials the site of competing historical cultures, in this case those of the perpetrators, victims, and bystanders. This paper also introduced the specific difficulties of memorializing a site when the remains of the dead are still present.

Session 2: The materiality of memorials

This session introduced issues concerning the material experience of memorialization: how does commemoration work? Are you meant to feel a particular way when looking at a memorial and what happens if you do not feel this way? Is there a certain amount of time necessary for a memorial response to an event and is this collapsing as the need for memorialization seems to be becoming more urgent?

The opening paper of this session was given by Saruhan Mosler on the 'Aesthetics of memories'. This was very interesting in giving a practitioner's perspective to the process of memorialization. The paper introduced pertinent issues of contemporary memorial construction. It presented observations on the form of memorials and how they have changed over time, principally how more traditional vertical forms of memorial such as obelisks and columns have evolved into horizontal forms which utilize the landscape space which they inhabit. It was, however, Mosler's comment that 'memorials have to create eidetic images that have the ability to recall the past and present sensuous images' that provoked intense discussion amongst the audience.

This was followed by Charlotte Bearn who presented an engaging paper on 'Memorializing the 7 July bombings in London'. This dealt with important issues concerning the ownership of memory, and was very successful in demonstrating the exclusivity of memorialization following a tragic event. The prioritization of the victims' families and the exclusion of those who had been physically affected by the event is reminiscent of that of soldiers returning from the First World War; the exclusion of veterans from commemorative activities being a common phenomenon in the UK in the period following this conflict (Goebel, 2007). Bearn also introduced the debate of whether or not memorials should be reconciliatory, and include references to the perpetrators.

The session was concluded by another insightful paper from the perspective of a practitioner. Colin Burden, a landscape architect, discussed his approach to designing a memorial to commemorate the First World War Battle of Gheluvelt. This paper

was very successful in exploring contemporary memorialization practice and examining the real world challenges facing those assigned to the construction of memorials. Burden's paper also gave rise to the interesting issue of the lifespan of the memorial, and whether less permanent forms of memorialization are more appropriate as they force each generation to reconsider its response to the event commemorated.

CRIC Session: This short session introduced the work of the CRIC Project. Following from the themes of the previous session, it called for a different notion of agency to be used when looking at war memorials, one which is more metaphorical, and also for an inclusion of agency of the people who design memorials.

Session 3: Commemorative landscape

This session examined the ability of memorials to be places in their own right. It explored the relationship between memorials and competing historical narratives and pertinent issues such as the hijacking of commemoration for political purposes and, as a result, their potential to be divisive.

The session began with a study of the Slana Banja memorial complex in Tuzla by Ioannis Armakolas. This provided an example of attempts at more reconciliatory memorialization through the burying of Muslim and non-Muslim victims of the 25 May Massacre on the same site, overlooking the city.

Next, Britt Baillie's paper, 'Problematic patrimony: the role of an "obsolete" memorial in Vukovar', demonstrated the way a single site can have multiple reinterpretations over time. This paper explored the biographies of Vukovar's Partisan monuments since the collapse of the former Yugoslavia. Picking up on the themes introduced by Tomas Sniegon, it also provided an example of the difficulties of dealing with memorial sites where the bodies of the victims are present.

Pheroze Unwalla concluded the session with a fascinating discussion of 'Reconciliation territoriality and memorialization'. This paper traced the history of memorialization at Gallipoli. It focused particularly on the post-1980 period, and demonstrated the continued salience of issues of memorialization some distance from the period they are commemorating. It also introduced the concern of the competitive nature of memorialization, when political rivalry rather than remembrance are the driving force behind their construction.

Session 4: Memorial agency

The first paper of the day was given by Laura McAtackney on 'Revisiting the Troubles: Post-conflict rememberings in contemporary Northern Ireland'. This compelling study continued themes from the previous day and demonstrated the potential for highly politicized commemorative practices. It also highlighted broader physical trends in memorialization processes, such as the inclusion of images of the victims within the memorials themselves rather than more abstract representations.

The second paper, presented by John Giblin, discussed 'Memorialization priorities in post-conflict Western Great Lakes Africa'. This was a very engaging comparative study of memorialization practices in Rwanda and Uganda. It demonstrated a very

different approach to death between the two countries discussed, but also provoked thought about ‘familiar’ memorialization processes and what is considered an ‘appropriate’ memorial. This was particularly true of the way in which the physical remains of those who had been killed formed an integral part of the memorial itself; in one case with bodies being exhumed so that they could be displayed with decaying tissue still attached. Also fascinating was the way in which the recollections of a survivor who had chosen to stay at the site changed his narrative of the events over time so that they gradually became more in line with the official government narrative.

Akiko Takenaka followed this with an exploration of ‘War memorials and the post-memory generation in contemporary East Asia’. This paper examined the difficulties faced by the ‘post-memory’ generation, that is the generation that has inherited the trauma but in a fragmented way (Hirsh, 1997). It was clear from this paper that these issues can be much more complex and difficult to overcome than the issues of those who have experienced the trauma themselves.

The session was ended by Dacia Viejo-Rose and her paper ‘The elusive goal of “democratic memorials”’. In this paper, Viejo-Rose dealt with the complex issues of making the intangible tangible through the process of memorialization. Using the case study of the Spanish Civil War, she explored the social and political impacts of war memorials.

Session 5: Politics of memorials

The keynote speaker for this session was Shirley Gunn of the Human Rights Media Centre, who gave a passionate talk about the Trojan Horse Massacre and the fight to memorialize it. This was the most captivating and memorable paper of the seminar. Through a series of images, Shirley led the audience through the events of 15–16 October 1985 in Athlone and Crossroads, Cape Town. Although the presentation was hindered slightly by technical difficulties, this in no way detracted from the profound impact of the paper which demonstrated the emotive power of memorials following times of immense trauma and highlighted her struggle to prevent the politicizing of the memorialization process.

The difficult task of following this paper was given to Benjamin Morris who presented ‘The forgotten storm: the Hurricane Katrina memorial’. This paper examined why this memorial is ignored by those it aimed to serve and why it ultimately fails as a memorial. Suggestions were made that the memorial was not sympathetic to the culture in which it was located and that the static monumental memorial created was at odds with a culture which usually deals with death in a processual way.

To conclude, Elizabeth Harrington Lambert presented ‘Between Bauhaus and Buchenwald: Landscape and memory in post-Wende Weimar’. This paper explored the difficulty in dealing with the monumental physical remains of ‘undesirable heritage’ in the light of changing historical consciousness. This has been an issue which has presented its own particular problems when dealing with Nazi monumental architecture in Germany (Macdonald, 2006) and Harrington Lambert’s paper proved a very interesting case study.

Session 6: Memorial policies and practices

The final session of the day was begun by Tatiana Zhurzhenko speaking on ‘The contested meaning of Holodomor memorials in Ukraine’. This paper explored the difficult issue of memorializing an event some time after it has occurred, in this case the Ukrainian Great Famine of 1932–33 known as the Holodomor.

This was followed by the only paper of the seminar given by a heritage professional: ‘Not one forgotten: The Leicestershire and Rutland War memorials project’ by Elizabeth Blood. This project aims not only to identify ways in which to record and conserve memorials but also to provide a more human approach to the study of memorialization. It does so by giving identity to the names listed on the memorial through an online resource which links the names listed with other personal materials, including photographs, stories, and letters. What was clear from this is this personal information, both tangible and intangible, is as least as important as the memorial itself.

The last paper of the seminar was given by Katherine Cook on ‘Commemoration in context: A landscape approach to funerary monuments’. This paper described an insightful phenomenological study of the Hamilton Cemetery in Canada. It was the only paper to approach processes of funerary memorialization rather than memorials to conflicts or other tragic events. Of particular interest was the way the study sought to bridge individual practice with larger socio-cultural trends, something which would be of value to those studying other forms of memorialization process.

Discussion

Overall, the seminar was highly successful and raised many thought-provoking issues. There were attempts to reconcile the case-study approach through discussions of the overriding themes of each session to bring out broader issues of memorialization processes. The seminar was particularly valuable in bringing together both researchers and practitioners from a wide range of disciplines. This led to a diverse range of papers which showed the very different memorial practices carried out in different societies — a refreshing break from UK- and USA-dominated research.

Many interesting questions arose from the discussions. An important theme was the ways in which memorialization presents new problems to each generation, first for those who have experienced the traumatic event, secondly for those for whom this event is still ‘present’ through the stories of their parents and grandparents, and finally for those who have no connection to the event or those who have died, yet still feel the need to carry out memorialization. Of particular relevance was the debate regarding the role of the academic and especially the level to which academics should become engaged with the memorialization process.

What was slightly disappointing was the lack of engagement with some of the theoretical issues which hinder the discipline as a whole, such as the over-abundance of terminology relating to memory (Kansteiner, 2002; Klein, 2000) and, in particular, the profusion of new terminology relating to memorialization processes. Although this issue was touched upon, perhaps more discussion of the theoretical frameworks used to approach memorial studies and their suitability for researching contemporary

processes would have been beneficial. On a technical note, many of the papers suffered due to poor timing, and there was a feeling in some cases that the most interesting parts of the papers were missed as they were cut short. The conference therefore would have benefited perhaps from being extended to three days to allow more time for discussion following each paper, which did at times feel a little rushed. These are, however, minor criticisms on what was otherwise a lively and stimulating seminar.

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