

The Road-as-Shrine: A Case Study in Design Process over Product

SUE-ANNE WARE

Sue-Anne Ware is a senior lecturer and co-ordinates postgraduate studies in landscape architecture at RMIT University in Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.
Email: sueanne.ware@rmit.edu.au

KEY WORDS

Memorials
Design process
Ephemerality
Landscape entropy
Political landscapes

PROPOSITION

LANDSCAPES HAVE A life beyond their spatial effects. This paper examines this proposition through the Road-as-Shrine, a staged project currently in progress, that I initiated as one of several, in my design-based doctorate, titled 'Anti-Memorials: Re-thinking the Language of Memory'. The examination attempts to position the Road-as-Shrine project through precedent research and speculation about the design processes of other memorial designs.

DESCRIPTION

The Road-as-Shrine is a series of memorial garden insertions. It is sited on a 500 metre section of a rural road near Churchill, in the LaTrobe Valley, Victoria, and looks at highway fatalities revealed and assembled as memorials. Several stages evolve, from a native remembrance garden, to a roadside re-vegetation programme, and back to a paddock.¹ It incorporates spontaneous roadside fatality markers, local community collaborations and drive-by gardens. It is situated within contemporary landscape architectural issues of constructed ecologies, alternative roadside re-vegetation planting regimes and landscape entropy.

Planting, cultural identity and the Road-as-Shrine project

In both its practical and ceremonial significance, tree planting in Israel has played an essential part in resettling the land ... To work the land was to become part of it and the natural cycle it represented.²

The majority of Australians regard cultivation as integral to Australian identity. In the LaTrobe Valley, agriculture and agro-forestry are relied upon for their products; scenic qualities are considered vital for the tourism market; identity is celebrated as 'deli and dairy country', and sentiment and idealism are intertwined with landscape cultivation. Additionally, the tradition of remembrance gardens had resurgence in Australia after World War One, in providing a place for grieving and honouring war heroes. Country towns, with ties to local Returned and Services Leagues, created memorial gardens as signifiers of cycles of life and death: it is that very recognisable symbol of remembrance that is necessary in this project.

A memorial with a very different history, but whose people share the connection between memory and land, is the Martyrs' Forest outside Jerusalem. Trees have been planted as a living memorial to the Holocaust – one for each victim. The forest takes on a double-edged significance, remembering the dead and signifying

a return to the land. On a more local scale, the Road-as-Shrine project also became an act of community mourning and remembrance. The first planting day was a coming together for families, concerned citizens, and students. In a conventional sense this would be the culmination of the project, however, it was only one moment in a very rich process.

The processes by which the project unfolded have perhaps been more interesting than the actual garden itself.

PROCESS – SOFTWARE AND HARDWARE: COUNCIL PERMITS AND THE ART OF COMPROMISE

This section seeks to compare and discuss the work in relation to the methodology of landartists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. Relevant to the Road-as-Shrine project is their differentiation of project *software*, represented by the preparatory work (legal papers, planning permits, negotiations, photographs, meetings), from the *hardware*, the installation itself: the *software* affecting the outcome of the *hardware*.³ The City of LaTrobe Council's report on recommendations for the Road-as-Shrine project, *software*, is cited throughout this paper to demonstrate the richness of this process.

Conceptually, this notion of 'software' stretching the dimension of the design beyond the actuality of the eventual 'hardware', was borne out in the Road-as-Shrine. Compromises to a cooperative agreement between VicRoads, the City of LaTrobe and RMIT University were required for the siting. VicRoads rejected the initial site because the verge was considered too narrow, with smoke reducing visibility during cold burns.⁴ The wider entry into Monash University was therefore proposed as more favourable, until university authorities objected to the entrance being black for two weeks after the fire regime. Then, serendipitously, we discovered the rural shortcut between Churchill and Morwell. It also had recent markers commemorating two youths who had died there in accidents.

In the following instance too, design outcomes beyond a built landscape eventuated from challenges to the Road-as-Shrine.

This project may glorify road deaths. The term 'Avenue of Honour' could be seen as giving an inappropriate message to young drivers, encouraging reckless driving by allowing the interpretation that it is "honourable" to be killed in a road accident.⁵

As a result, an educational programme was initiated in local schools by the designers, engaging students in discussions about road safety and the memorial's intent.

In Christo's *Running Fence* project, a 40 kilometre fence traversed 59 landowners' properties and 12 public land authorities. Two farmers objected so strenuously to the project crossing their property that the artists compromised, reconfiguring the fence in two points as a kink. When the work was realised, ten years of *software* negotiations culminated in two weeks of *hardware* form.⁶

Throughout, Council discussions generated interesting dimensions to the Road-as-Shrine, ensuring that the project, while grounded in memorial commemoration practices, engaged in the politics of the community.

'DRAWINGS'

Inadvertently, visual material was utilised beyond its original intent as design representation, to become another focus for the Road-as-Shrine. Its potential was recognised early on by a councillor in Churchill, where posters are considered integral to soliciting community response. Tourists were enticed to visit the project by a post-card series that depicted a journey through the scenographic landscape to a drive-through memorial. In addition, seed packets of memorial Everlasting Daisies, given away at a local mall, engaged with the community at a one-to-one level. The numerous wearable memorials that allow individuals to show their support for various causes inspired the seed packets.⁷ The seed packets encourage the public to plant the same flowers in their own gardens as a memorial and as a way of remembering those whom they may have lost.

Christo, who considers his preparatory drawings and models as *software* crucial to crystallising his ideas, deliberately utilises drawings to sway public and, ultimately, authority's opinions towards the work. To gather momentum for the wrapping of Paris's Point Neuf, Christo prominently exhibited a model. The ensuing public response pushed Mayor Cheaurate to approve the project.

As in Christo's work, these council negotiations are a record of process and examination of the nature of public work.⁸

SPONTANEOUS MEMORIALS AND POLITICAL, CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Spontaneous memorials mark the deaths of people who do not fit into the categories of those we expect to die, those who may be engaging in routine activities in which there is a reasonable expectation of safety, such as driving their car to work. They do not replace traditional funerary rites: instead, they emerge as adjunct rituals, which extend the opportunity for other types of mourning. According to Christina Leimer, spontaneous memorialisation is characterised by private acts of mourning displayed publicly; rites which are not formally organised at their inception; and memorials at the site of death.⁹

The site already has a small unofficial memorial. The project could be construed as a personal memorial, not a generic one.¹⁰

The Road-as-Shrine memorial aims to create a framework or backdrop for personal memorialisation to occur, not to erase it. In this case it ostensibly served as a garden for the existing spontaneous memorials. In the case of Tel Aviv City Hall Square after Yitzhak Rabin's assassination, the site became 'a stage to an extraordinary act of spontaneous public commemoration'. Mira Engler's discussion of this work reconstructs how it unfolded over time and its relationship to politics and Jewish tradition.¹¹ Furthermore, "Spontaneous memorials invite participation ... They are populist phenomena, places for communities uniting in grief and sometimes anger. They create, for a while, sacred ground".¹²

The Road-as-Shrine is centrally a protest against the privatisation of infrastructure, which has significantly influenced public road safety outcomes. As such, it attempts to offer both political and cultural critique, mainly through the litany of operations it has beyond the physical landscape. More specifically, it draws conceptually from the following example.

When Malice Green, an African-American, was beaten to death by Detroit police officers, a spontaneous memorial immediately became a destination and ultimately a space for protest against police brutality. It consisted of messages, flowers, candles, shells, bibles: objects associated with veneration. The Road-as-Shrine project reinforced a family's protest against the safety conditions of Hazelwood Estate Road. The project also recognised the role of public discourse about memorials.

If adverse comments were received from the public, the roadside verge would be returned to its original condition by the project team at no cost to Council.¹³

One of the fundamental principals guiding this work involves ideas centred on landscape entropy and ephemerality: the eventual return of the site back to paddock is ultimately what the project intends. This is mainly through its acknowledgement of the analogy that it offers within landscape ephemerality. If there is spirited public debate about the value of the project, then it achieves another aim of the research, to engage the public in a discourse about memorials and their meaning in public, everyday spaces. So, this stipulation by the Council is actually a remarkable example of how politics play a crucial role in design work.

CONCLUSIONS

Generally speaking, we tend to evaluate projects by the physical and spatial ramifications of landscape design. While these are important to design discourse, this paper attempts to show that the processes that unfold over the life of a project are themselves design outcomes. In appropriating from the above projects, the Road-as-Shrine project contributed to the community an education programme, a tourism device, and community collaborations well beyond the actual planting day. It experiments with landscape entropy and constructed ecologies as it returns to paddock over time; and it critiques normative memorial practices in a fundamentally new way. As a demonstration project, it can be applied to other roads elsewhere, each site having specific environmental, cultural and political agendas. This paper attempts to situate this project within a larger body of work and critical practice, as an enabling hybrid, and ultimately an unravelling of design research.

NOTES

¹ The first planting occurs in the road's verge with growth and bloom cycles timed to significant dates (birthdays, fathers day and so on), as a literal garden of remembrance. The second phase of the project involves a cold burn and re-vegetation through seed matt technology. The cold-burn cycle matches peak accident periods and thus carries out a *Drive Safely* message to drivers. After the vegetation is burned, the scorched earth will briefly reveal

a series of seed mats. Currently, a large percentage of the local council's landscape budget is dedicated to mowing maintenance regimes. Native plant species should require less maintenance and therefore reduce costs while offering an interesting aesthetic road experience. The re-seeding will also help construct a new ecology while reflecting a larger unifying gesture from the community. Ultimately, if left unmown and without weed removal, the verge will return to paddock, hence bringing the memorial full circle. The design relies on a kinaesthetic experience of landscape and its ephemeral nature for the memorial experience.

- ² James Young (1993) *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, p 219.
- ³ Jacob Baal-Teshuva (ed) (1993) *Christo: The Reichstag and Urban Projects*, Munich: Prestel Publishers, p 8.
- ⁴ The cold burns only occur once every seven to ten years. In phone calls that led to this decision, VicRoads officer David Gellion, also expressed quite strongly that by supporting a road-memorial project VicRoads may open itself up to litigious procedures. If VicRoads was a part of the memorial then they may be admitting liability for the lives lost.
- ⁵ LaTrobe City Council, Comments on Planning Permit Document, 7 July 2003, p 106.
- ⁶ Werner Spies (1977) *The Running Fence Project, Christo*, New York: Harry N Abrams, Incorporated.
- ⁷ Think Pink Breast Cancer Day ribbons, red – AIDS ribbons and so on.
- ⁸ See Gates Project New York and Wrapped Walk Ways in Kansas City. Ellen R Goheen (1978) *Christo: Wrapped Walk Ways*, New York: Harry N Abrams, Incorporated, and Christo and Jeanne-Claude's website <<http://christojeanneclaude.net/tg.html>> (last accessed 16 May 2004).
- ⁹ Allen Haney, Christina Leimer, and Julian Lowery (1997) Spontaneous Memorials: Violent Death and Emerging Mourning Ritual, *Omega: The Journal of Death and Dying*, vol 35, issue 2, Fall.
- ¹⁰ LaTrobe City Council, Comments on Planning Permit Document, 7 July 2003, p 106.
- ¹¹ Mira Engler (1999) A Living Memorial: Commemorating Yitzhak Rabin at the Tel Aviv Square, *Places*, Winter, vol 12, no 2, pp 4–11.
- ¹² Harriet F Senie (1999) Mourning in Protest: Spontaneous Memorials and the Sacralization of Public Space, *Harvard Design Magazine*, Fall, p 25.
- ¹³ LaTrobe City Council, Comments on Planning Permit Document, 7 July 2003, p 106.