

Remember Me: Municipal Memorials in New Haven

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Civic Media and Tactical Design

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“Remember Me” was born out of a set of inspirations and conditions that just happened to come together in the right time and place. Prior to January 2012, I had been interested in Youth Rights Media (YRM) for some time. YRM is a New Haven non-profit that teaches media production and community organizing to teenagers in an after-school program. I became involved around the same time that I started exploring the ideas behind civic media and tactical design, and I knew that I wanted to apply those principles to the organization. For a decade now, Youth Rights Media has been producing documentaries and public service announcements that deal with critical issues relating to urban youth and inner-city problems, such as the “school to prison pipeline,”¹ school dropout rates,² or “digital stories” of the youths themselves. At the time of this project, they were working on “Unspoken,” a film dealing with gun violence and the way it affects people whose stories and voices are seldom heard.

“Unspoken” came out of a particularly bad year for New Haven. In 2011, there were 34 homicides, the highest rate in 20 years.³ During the middle of that year, local media reported New Haven to be the “4th Most Dangerous City in America,”⁴ a figure that was inaccurately compiled⁵ from FBI data (which expressly warned against ranking in such a fashion⁶). In the course of a media literacy class with students in the Youth Rights Media program, they expressed how they felt this sort of information falsely represented their community and their own feelings of identity. There is more to gun violence than what we can just hear on the news, and this was what they were working on with their documentary film.

“Remember Me” is intended to associate itself with those aims through several functions. First, there is a need to humanize the victims of homicide as people with personal narratives that confront the victim/perpetrator dichotomy which can lead to victim blaming and stereotypes.

Simply because someone was killed in a “bad area” doesn’t detract from their humanity, and this project intended to emphasize that. Second, the tactical design function borrows from the work of artists engaged in culture jamming, such as Norm Magnusson’s I-75 Project⁷ or Mark Daye’s signs to raise awareness of homeless issues.⁸ The subversive nature of such a medium legitimizes and officializes the victims through design which closely mimics official signage regulatory codes. Third, such a project would be a natural extension of the urban and highway phenomenon of public memorials. These sidewalk and roadside memorials are temporary, comprised of flowers, personal artifacts, stuffed animals, and other perishable goods. Most often these are associated with highways and traffic accidents.⁹ In a similar vein, “ghost bikes” are a worldwide phenomenon that commemorate cyclists who are killed by automobile drivers, by leaving a bicycle painted white chained to fixture near where the accident occurred.¹⁰ Fourth, by facilitating the exchange of a personal narrative about the victims life to the greater community, it provides new “mnemonic enculturations”¹¹ for the use of those within contested space to remember the cultural makeup differently. Sharing the victims stories provides a richer understanding of what was lost, and suggests the sort of stories that still makes up the rest of the population.

Physical Methods

The methods in which “Remember Me” performs these tasks is fairly straightforward. Through a series of collaborative workshops, students in the Youth Rights Media program exercise their documentarian skills by identifying and collecting the stories of the 34 victims of 2011. This project has 34 components with separate virtual and physical installations, not all of

which must be executed (though ideally, the project would only be complete with all 34 pieces). For each installation, family and friends of the victim are identified, and a request is made to have an interview about the victim. Assuming they agree, the youth conduct an interview, while also recording video or audio and collecting a picture of the victim. This stage requires a high level of sensitivity on behalf of the interviewer, to be attentive to the emotionality of those being interviewed. Once finished, a debriefing workshop is done, in which we identify key parts of the victim's life and experiences which can be incorporated into two products. First, a short biography is written and posted (with the consent of the interviewee) on a website for the project, MunicipalMemorial.org. Any additional multimedia is also posted along with this biography. Second, a road sign is created which mimics an official design - specifically, the "2 Hour Parking" time limit signs. In the top left block where the 2 would go, the victims number out of 34 is posted. Next to that, in the top right, is the victims name. In the center of the sign, there will be a condensed message about the victim and their life. The bottom of the sign will read "KILLED [date of the victim's death], REMEMBERED TODAY, MUNICIPALMEMORIAL.ORG" This sign is the physical component of the project. Once installed at the actual location where the victim was killed, a picture will be taken and posted in their entry on the website. This will complete the virtual component of the project.

To ensure the successful mimicry of official signage and be a true piece of "culture jamming," all regulatory codes from the Manual of Traffic Signs¹² and Manual on Uniform Traffic Control Devices (MUTCD)¹³ will be followed as closely as possible in designing and creating the sign. Aside from the actual content and purpose of the sign, it will follow guidelines for typeface and dimensions. The color of the lettering and borders will be light blue, which has

no official usage as of yet but is reserved as one of the official standard colors. While traditional roadsigns use reflective film to ensure visibility by motorists,¹⁴ this project will use automotive spray paint to maintain a low cost of materials. The signs themselves are aluminum blanks purchased from wholesalers online. The website is a standard Wordpress blog with domain mapping to the unique url selected for this project.

Virtual Memorials

While the physical component remediates earlier concepts and combines them in an original way, the virtual component has plenty of precedents to it. Aaron Hess writes about the rhetorical construction of memorials on the web, using examples created after the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The materiality of commemorative sites “operate in a state of rhetorical permanence” in which “they cannot easily be silenced,” according to his adapted analysis from Carole Blair.

Second, the listener operates with his or her interactive rhetorical body through his or her own embodied existence in proximity to the memorial site. For example, while at a physical memorial site, the viewer must negotiate the pathways created by the site’s existence. In her analysis of the five sites, Blair asks five questions to guide her discussion: what is the significance of the text’s material existence? What are the apparatuses and degrees of durability displayed by the text? What are the text’s modes or possibilities of reproduction or preservation? What does the text do to (or with, or against) other texts? How does the text act on person(s)?¹⁵

Hess contends that web memorials utilize the same material functions of physical memorials, but with a unique expression of the vernacular voice. He also cites the common usage of the personal narrative, as they “are crucial to the preservation of authentic authorial sentiments in the creation of the pages,” and tie readers to that experience in that moment of history.¹⁶ Much of

Hess's focus comes to the nature of community which arises out of web memorials, but this important aspect of materiality to the rhetorical construction of the web memorial is what is emulated by this project.

In another example, Pamela Roberts more personal web memorials, or "web cemeteries" which commemorate individuals, rather than a specific event or tragedy. Roberts focuses on bereavement and the elderly, noting the downsides presented by the age gap between web users in this issue. She also notes the beneficial aspects to community and shared grief in constructing web memorials for those who have passed away. To that end, "for many, having a personal web memorial has increased their ties to other bereaved people."¹⁷

Although MunicipalMemorial is not a personal web memorial, it associates those it commemorates with others who lost family members or friends in 2011. The Wordpress structure makes it easy for users to potentially interact with the site manager and other visitors, by posting comments and possibly submitting blog posts.

Ethical Dimensions

In considering the ethics of this piece, the relational aesthetics of the works and agency of the participants was always a concern. The agency and involved participation of the community was paramount to the authenticity of this project, and depended on how much the works served those it claimed to represent. Drawing from Claire Bishop's work on relational aesthetics and the ethical tensions the Santiago Sierra's pieces which were used as an example, it seems necessary to examine the quality of relationships created by the components of "Remember Me." How does the function and purpose of the piece serve the community that it participates with? What is the

quality of that relationship, the depth and nature of that interaction?¹⁸ Each municipal memorial and biography is designed with the community as the primary audience. It services a perceived need and empowers the members of that space in that process.

Ultimately, I believe this project serves the New Haven community by providing the public a better understanding of victims as more than just statistics, but as fellow citizens who previously inhabited the space. Contested articulations of what those neighborhoods now have the input of the victims personal narratives. Facilitating it with members of community retains the authenticity of the project's purpose. While this project has only completed a limited pilot as a prototype for other installations, I believe it has the potential to give a lasting remembrance to those lives, their biographies, and the memorials we create. While specifically designed for New Haven, I feel this approach could be adapted and applied to other environments, using other parameters integral to those areas. For now, it would be nice to see as many pieces completed as possible.

Notes

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