

Narrative Archaeology: reading the landscape

The dynamic of narrative has long been one of certain specific conditions. The narrative arc, establishment of tone, selection of detail for mood and setting, or *place*. Narrative now can be placed in the physical world. The use of gps, wireless and augmented reality makes this possible. The writer no longer has to choose detail to create fictive world and its tone for one to passively read; the new paradigm finds the story written *into this world, the physical world*. The writer historically has chosen details to establish tone, mood, psychological underpinnings and a sense of story world as place. The author now can write with these tools but also those of the physical world itself. The narrative sections are placed in specific physical locations to encounter in sequence and thus are to be integrated into what is inferred from the places themselves and their stories in time.

The writer/artist can now read cities, towns, and open spaces. The place has layers to be read, studied, historical events and details, ethnography, geography, geology, etc (the list is quite long and exhilarating). Narrative written utilizing gps and wireless to trigger on a laptop, pda or cell phone moves into a “narrative Archeology” a reading of physical place as one moves through the world with story elements and sections triggered at specific locations. and detail.

Narrative Archeology is a way of describing this new form of writing, art, discourse, information dispersion and above all, narrative. The pop culture notion of Archaeology is one of digging in the ground and finding artifacts of the past in layers of soil. In this concept, time can be literally seen in the layers of ground and in the artifacts

pulled from different depths of the dig. The new paradigm of narrative utilizing locative technologies is one akin to archaeology, but of narrative and place. Now, the layers in time are unseen until discovered in the author's research and then placed into narrative to trigger at key physical locations. The details, events, patterns shifts, etc may be from 1945 on one corner and from 1914 a few hundred feet away. The narrative sections triggered and experienced by a participant's movements form a narrative archaeology as the story sections culled from past information and the information itself are being pulled from the past and layers in time into present view.

The author may be a single person, a person collaborating with others for technical support to produce the narrative, or a group working together actively creating the narratives and the conceptual whole of the work. In a Barthean sense, the ultimate end author is the movement and patterns of the person navigating the space, their choices, aesthetic bias in the physical world toward certain sections, buildings or objects to move toward and investigate, and their selection of duration and breadth of movement. The work is placed in the physical world, thus the “reading” is of narratives in sequences as experienced and consumed as one also “reads” the spaces themselves and the information and stories of each specific location.

Another key element is the author selecting what type(s) of information on the place and its properties, shifts and past, of research and layers in time. Why choose certain details from specific years in the place of others? This can be a writers strategy, as once was that of fictive detail, of establishing tone, voice, of repetition and establishing a

sense of intention and commentary on ideas, of tonality and how details connect to build in story as it progresses along. Now it is of the place itself, of its many tones and “faces” in time and the context of the work itself and its thrust that is laid upon individual storefronts, bridge sections, corners at stoplights facing where a building once had been and has since been lost in time. The tone of information and how it is experienced may be lush and exuberant of rich unseen past or a bleak condemnation of what has been forgotten, erased or gentrified; the information itself and the narratives written can infer a commentary and feeling of place.

An interesting antecedent in written narrative for some of these concepts is the book “The Dictionary of the Khazars” by Milorad Pavic. The book is essentially an encyclopedia of a fictional lost society with sections on certain key people, events, places, each an independent text. Pavic published it to be considered a novel. The book is called a novel but it is composed of many small parts that are designed to stand alone. Pavic designed it as a non-linear novel of information with the ultimate work determined by the reader's choosing. If the reader opened the book to a certain page and read its section of perhaps only a few pages, fine, they had “read” the “novel”. If one read a few sections at different times and was at some point content, that was the novel for them. This was a brilliant reformulation of textual narrative into malleable, ultimately user formulated as read, of narrative sections designed to function alone as well as in context and sequence with other sections.

Projects such as “34 north 118 west” have shown the potential of a new experientially driven spatial narrative interlaced in and commenting on the world itself. The project “34 north 118 west” used a slate laptop with gps , headphones, and an

interactive map to create a narrative of a four block area of Los Angeles. The map had graphic hot spots that marked narratives and their trigger points set to latitude and longitude. As the participant moved they would determine what sequence would be triggered based on how far they moved and in what patterns they traveled. The project looked at the last hundred years of shifts in population and infrastructure in that area and the resonance of what is lost, forgotten or changed in time. The buildings are mostly the same as in the turn of the 20th century when the area was build up around the railroads and was the key hub for raw materials by rail for early Los Angeles.

The research was extensive and from this the most important historical details, facts of demolished buildings, of waves of commerce and housing in the last hundred years and a sense of what layers were really rich and begging to be made agitated into being again in triggered narratives based on their information emerged. The artifacts became apparent from the past that needed to be placed in the present los angeles. The juxtaposition of past and present at times became commentary on the lost versions of the city and area beginning in the early 1900's which still left traces in railroad tracks visible at times in the sidewalks and holes in the ground where structures once covered the collection of materials off the trains. Traces also emerged of a wave of latina immigrants working on the railroads in the 1940's, of the glory of the la grande passenger station with a glass dome long demolished where now is a barren storage area and an electrified fence.

The material selected to reference and construct narratives from established a tone, established layers of place in time, and with the use of audio as one navigated created an odd feeling of being aware of two places at once.

While walking through the 4 block area mapped out by the project, some participants found people coming up to them to ask a question or in conversations walking past to seem fictional as they were engrossed in a narrative of another time playing in their head phones. A doppler effect sample of an old train at a corner with no visible train tracks often made participants stop cold fearing a collision.

The narrative sections were formulated integrating historical, ethnographic and architectural information about the four block area over the last 100 years. The narratives were constructed to be each individually developed for, and integrated into a specific location. The use of “weighted narratives” and “cumulative resonance” allowed an endless number of completely different narratives and experiences to be formulated depending on duration and patterns of the participant's movement the space.

Weighted narratives are sections that are weighted with more meta-textual references, subtext, and information of place to ensure at certain intervals there is not a tight control on the non linearity, but a degree of weight and meaning will resonate regardless of the person's path and duration of movement. The effect is that of a stronger guarantee of the participant moving past places referencing key larger ideas, tone and details at intervals without placing a strong control on their movement and how it ultimately sequences narrative sections together into an experience of the work. These were placed as were all narrative sections, after research, location studies and analysis of map on which the narratives of place and considerations of larger resonances were placed before programming.

Cumulative resonance is a way to elucidate meaning and concepts in pure non-linearity; key metaphors and details begin to build on each other into a sense of larger

issues and concepts. As the participant moves and triggers a sequence of narratives they increasingly develop a sense of the larger concepts and meanings of the work as a whole. The narratives were written as to build into larger commentary on lost history in time, of absence as presence and place.

. The author now can work with a massive and rich range of researched information on the location(s) to integrate into what is experienced as the space is “read”. There is a connotative and denotative city and connotative and denotative of any physical space from farmland, desert and mountain range etc. The narrative now can be constructed with this in mind as well and the author can study place and see a particular sense of resonance of connotative and denotative (what is seen on an immediate level and what can be inferred on a deeper level) and develop a narrative that conveys this to the participant as they move through the space and sound files of narratives trigger at selected points. The author can now create a story space as integrated into what is to be inferred from the physical at the same time; there no longer needs to be a discreet separation between story world and the physical world.

It is possible for the author to select elements of the information about the locations where trigger points are to be placed, the area as a whole, its fit and tension within larger spaces both in geography, cartography, politically (demographic shifts, borders, gentrification issues, preservation concerns..), navigation and in time and history. The information published in books, journals and other media can now be moved from the physical dislocation of archives and shelves in libraries as in the previous paradigm of place and its analysis and study and now can return with great resonance and

fusion back into the precise place(s) from which they came. The author can place forgotten or faded histories, lost buildings, previous incarnations of areas, the tension or richness of who has come through the place at what times in waves of commerce, housing, and previous events.

Narrative Archaeology allows a context to be selected as in the narrative and its resonance of symbolism, detail and connectivity of its parts into a larger whole (as in written non-linear works); but it also allows this in terms of what layers from the past are placed together in sequence(s) as well as what information of specific trigger points is selected to resonate again. This integration creates a fascinating synthesis of commentary on the place and a specific agenda of the author. Possible examples are social/political/environmental commentary, reflection on the lost incarnations of place and the fragmented ghosts that remain in isolated older buildings and infrastructure, study of a particular piece of infrastructure such as a highway and its effects over time of a community and its commerce and community.

The narrative is experientially driven as it is triggered by the participant moving and places passed. The fact that the data layers and the larger analytical concepts are integrated into the narrative sections and their voice and triggered by the participant's movements, The experientially driven narrative archaeology of place has no distinction between academic voice and fictive voice, of dialects within construction, instead it occurs in a voice that is detail and story, of narrative and information and is fused to what is seen at that moment in the physical world. The short vignettes are recorded as sound files ideally as this allows it to be heard as a voice in one's ear. The effect is of seeing the present place as it is, while learning of what was and the two enhance what is seen or

make one question place as one permutation or constant.

The participant will glance at times at the map on the laptop, cell phone or pda between trigger points to see what is ahead, but otherwise will be looking at what surrounds them as they move. The importance of sound is that one can experience the audio while seeing the physical place. The effect is of being in one place and it being augmented, also of the past and unseen coming to life while one is in the present. Visuals compete, and if the information is primarily text on a device it becomes separated from the physical world and secondary; this is crucial as it can have the effect of making place and data of place two things independent of each other and not integrated into juxtaposition and comparison in the same way.

. Moving through a space is not a passive exercise as sitting on one world and reading (and actively imagining) in another; it is akin to a conversation. The “conversation” is between the place (streets, buildings, structures), its infrastructure (sidewalks, roadways, streetlight timings and traffic speeds in car and on foot, railway crossing, etc) and the movements chosen by the person walking. The place makes certain choices unavoidable, mitigated by its design, condition and controls, but it also makes many other aesthetic choices of the viewer/reader as they move past types of architecture, disrepair, renewal, perceived threat or comfort thresholds, and simply what they are individually drawn to at the time. . Punctuation in language and the written world can be viewed as a mediation and mitigation of speed, movement and flow. Structures such as sidewalks, stop lights, bridges, and roads can be seen also as mitigation of speed, flow and movement; thus both

narrative space and physical space are punctuated in a similar fashion.

The new narrative can work with these parallels in alteration of narrative content triggered, voice, cadence, and resonance as built to move along these same mitigations and mediations of movement of the participant in the physical spaces. The interesting option is one of the “ Conversation ”. Does the author focus more on content being triggered by the objects, structures and movement mitigation of the physical place as designed and its current state ? Does the author also alter the narratives in form and augment the content in real time, based on the patterns and speed of the person moving?

Movement, speed, direction , these all are elements of the participants' interaction with place and their aesthetic interface (their disposition edits what they choose to experience and thus sequenced as they move) in the sense that unseen layers in space are triggering as one interacts with what is seen and physically present, in infrastructure, architecture. It is possible for the writer/artist to now get a feel for the many variations of movements mediated in roads, streets, views as prescribed by what is built and visible, and accordant shifts within; the writer/artist can extrapolate how this correlates to variations of narratives triggered, of cadences, pauses, voice, speed of delivery, all set to the places one is encountering, sequencing and moving past.

The participant forms a physical interface as they move in different patterns of their own choice, patience and interest, this creates multiple works to be experienced a multiplicity of works ultimately authored by their path and what sequence of narratives they trigger. This is an exciting break from linearity and even other forms of non-

linearity as now many cohesive and full works of narrative and spatial analysis, experiences, each rich in detail and subtext exist.

As multiple works come to occupy areas in the cities, towns and open spaces, the possibility will emerge for areas to be “read” with multiple and differing voices, aesthetic approaches and thrusts and points of entry. As more locative narrative projects are emerging, areas of the landscape are beginning to fill in with a new resonant narrative interpretation and agitation of space. The city is to be read, but so are the open spaces, Suburbs, farmlands, and even the dams, bridges and other infrastructures and their locations , contexts and past. The possibilities are as resonant and vibrant in cities and beyond; *the landscape is waiting to be read..*