Memorials for the Future Competition

VOICEOVER Final Report
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Introduction

This report will introduce and describe our memorial design project, entitled VOICEOVER. VOICEOVER was a project submitted to the Memorials of the Future design competition held in 2016. In August of 2016 VOICEOVER was presented for final evaluation along with three other entries. One project was awarded first place and three projects were awarded honorable mentions. VOICEOVER received an honorable mention.

VOICEOVER Design Team Biographies

Anca Trandafirescu is an associate professor in architecture at The University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Trandafirescu teaches courses in design, theory, and representation and previously taught at the University of Oregon. In 2003 she established area.architecture, with Glenn Wilcox. The practice explores a breadth of design issues through speculative activities, competitions, commissioned projects, and design/build work particularly focused on the combination of interests in public access, material experimentation, and digital fabrication. The firm’s most recent and notable recognition includes: an Architect Magazine R+D Citation Award for c_LITH: Carbon Fiber Architectural Units in 2014, a Special Mention in Architizer A+ Awards for Flying Carpet in 2014, a Huron Valley Honor Award for Flying Carpet in 2014, an ACSA Faculty Design Award honorable mention for HOT AIR in 2011, runners-up in the TEX-FAB Repeat Competition in 2010, top 10 in the Young Architect’s Forum 10up Atlanta Competition in 2010, an honorable mention in the 99K House Competition in 2008. In 2009, Trandafirescu’s installation, “Hot Air,” was displayed in honor of the twentieth anniversary of the overthrow of the Romanian government in Timisoara, Romania. She held the Muschenheim Fellowship at the University of Michigan Taubman College in 2005-2006. She has a B.Arch. from Temple University and an M.Arch. the Bartlett, University College London. Trandafirescu is a registered architect in NY.

Troy Hillman is a recent graduate holding his Masters of Architecture and Bachelors of Science in Architecture from the University of Michigan’s Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. His final thesis sought to find space for those within a sexual minority through blurring boundaries of domestic control in the guest house with a more liberated and historically queer space, Hadrian’s Villa. Troy’s previous experience includes working for area.architecture, The Los Angeles Design Group, and Apple, where he participated on multiple award-winning project teams. He has worked as a designer and fabricator of speculative projects, full-scale installations, and furniture pieces.

Yurong Wu has completed his undergraduate study in architecture and is currently pursuing his Master of Architecture degree at the University of Michigan, Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning. Throughout his work and research projects, Yurong has explored his interest in the interdisciplinary intersection between architecture, art and narrative. He is the founder of How To Architecture! Design Competition and has previously worked at offices including OBRA Architects, Mass Design Group, Montroy Andersen DeMarco.

Amy Catania Kulper is an associate professor of architecture at the University of Michigan Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, where she teaches history, theory, and design. Kulper has taught at institutions including Cambridge University, The University of Pennsylvania, University of California Los Angeles, and Southern California Institute of Architecture. For the 2010-2011 academic year she is the Steelcase Research Professor at the University of Michigan’s Humanities Institute, working on a book manuscript entitled Immanent Natures: The Laboratory as Paradigm for Architectural Production. She is a three-time recipient of the Donna M. Salzer Award for teaching excellence. Kulper is an editorial board member of the Journal of Architectural Education and the journal’s design editor. Kulper has chapters published in Experiments: Architecture Between Sciences and the Arts, Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City, and Visions of the Industrial Age: Modernity and the Anxiety of Representation in European Culture, 1830-1914. Her articles appear in the Journal of Architecture, Candide: Journal of Architectural Knowledge, and Filed: Journal for Architecture.
Prologue

“The history written by historians, like the history informally fashioned by Mr. Everyman, is thus a convenient blend of truth and fancy, of what we commonly distinguish as “fact” and “interpretation.”

Carl L. Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian.”

“If we accept that history and memory are symbiotic, the corollary is that neither can be fixed, neither can be held in place. Revisionism becomes the norm, rather than something to be feared or deplored.”

Kirk Savage, “When the Ivory Tower Meets The Real World”

What kind of memorials should we make in America in the future?

For a long time, what and how we chose to remember through our built monuments tended to present singular and heroic versions of our historical events. This form of memorialization, however, largely erased the complexity of positions shaping those events. Worse, it excluded the diversity of the vast number of their participants. Perhaps the memorials we create in the future can become more representative, not of a single voice, but of a multi-cultural people that hold diverging understandings, and even, conflicting perspectives, on the events of their past.

VOICEOVER is a memorial project designed to “overlay” on our national monuments. It will collect and record the wide-ranging stories told by everyday people about the monuments. Then, it will organize the collection into an accessible oral archive to be preserved at the Library of Congress. Lastly, VOICEOVER’s pink flying mechanical parrots will “retell” the many collected stories at the memorials themselves. Each day new sites will be featured and more versions of our nation’s rich and diverse story will be added to the “portrait.” Each memorial site will become the place of active engagement between a physical location and its many accounts. Rather than a single perspective, VOICEOVER seeks to make space for conversation, debate, and disagreement as a new means of constructing our collective memory.
PROJECT COMPONENTS

Overlay

“It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and reorganize their memories.”

Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*

From the beginning VOICEOVER has been a project meant to critically reflect on the power that we all have to create our collective cultural heritage. Rather than designing a new freestanding monument we want to use an “overlay” system. This layer—conceptually and physically—sits alongside the “official” narrative maintained by our constructed national monuments.

[WHY OVERLAY?]
We believe an overlay could appropriate and reawaken the nation’s existing monuments in order that they may have greater representative power in our present-day society. As an addition to the “official” story, an overlay contains the multiple viewpoints of a diverse people—including our many underrepresented populations, or even, unpopular ideas. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional monuments that seek to present one singular, cohesive, and sanctioned version of history. As a “bottom up” system, then, the overlay is a means toward a much more democratic monument.

Concurrently, an overlay, allows us, also, to physically occupy the space of the National Mall with a design. Whereas present generations are prohibited from adding new construction to the areas surrounding the National Mall’s cross axes, VOICEOVER, because it is an overlay, provides a strategy for a continued participation in the design of the country’s physical memorial landscape.

Lastly, an overlay system, unlike ground-up memorial projects, allows visitors to better understand the fragmentary, messy, and constructed nature of our multifaceted and complex history. We believe this advocates for (not against) the value of official history as a demanding and imperative factor in the construction of our cultural heritage.

Sites

“There is nothing so invisible as a monument [...] Anything that endures over time sacrifices its ability to make an impression. Anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness, so to speak, forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness...”

Robert Musil, “Monuments”

The sites of VOICEOVER are the many existing constructed monuments and memorials of the city of Washington, D.C. These are the sites of our national, collective memories. They attempt to tell us who we are by virtue of telling us who we were. As such, these sites have the capacity to shape us. But do they?

Contrary to common perception, our memorials are sites of interpretation. They do not represent a definitive truth, but a version of a past event as expressed through the views of the people who made them. At rare times, when these views were no longer deemed appropriate, modifications are made. However due to high costs and difficult processes, these modifications are very infrequent. This has left us with memorials that no longer speak to our present understandings of history or to our contemporary societal situations. Rather than turning away from these sites to build yet another soon-to-be-obsolete monument, we propose to re-appropriate the existing memorial sites and claim them for this generation.
Curated Collection

“Today, curating as a profession means at least four things. It means to preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art. It means to be the selector of new work. It means to connect to art history. And it means displaying or arranging the work. But it’s more than that. Before 1800, few people went to exhibitions. Now hundreds of millions of people visit them every year. It’s a mass medium and a ritual. The curator sets it up so that it becomes an extraordinary experience and not just illustrations or spatialized books.”

Hans Ulrich Obrist, The Art of Curation

VOICEOVER is first the collection of an oral archive. Visitors with stories about the monuments and memorials of Washington D.C., whether large or small, whether historical or personal, whether experienced or mythical, in English or not, are invited to record their memories of the city’s many commemorative sites into a growing oral portrait.

Using StoryCorps as a model, the collection of the recordings for the archive occurs either in person or electronically online. Recordings in person are arranged by appointment in a mobile unit with a facilitator present. Online, the recordings are prompted by a list of questions. In both cases VOICEOVER requires a small staff that assists in the collection/recording, organization, and editing. For consistency, effectiveness, and scope the VOICEOVER staff is guided by a set of curatorial guidelines.

[WHY CURATE?]

In response to the highly curated nature of the monuments of Washington, D.C., VOICEOVER proposes a highly curated vocalic overlay of oral histories. Whereas the city’s existing monuments and memorials adhere to curatorial schemas that are largely chronological and hierarchical, VOICEOVER proposes an agenda that is digital, allowing for chance or unscripted overlays of oral histories over master narratives, and explicitly accommodating dissent, opposition, and counter-opinions.

Three tools or techniques embedded within the digital archive of oral histories collected by VOICEOVER attest to its fundamental inclusivity and malleability: information shape, interwingling, and ambient findability.

- Information Shape – Digital lingo often deploys terms that imply an optimal navigation route and a known end condition, such as wayfinding. Such navigation metaphors limit the potential for digital curation. Information shape avoids the trope of navigation, suggesting a ‘stickiness’ and three-dimensionality to archived content.

- Interwingling – Adhering to the concept of interwingling means acknowledging that ‘hierarchies’ and ‘categories’ may not be the best organizational devices for digital content. If content is organized, not topically or according to issues, but ambiently, mining content for all of its qualitative dimensions, a more fluid navigation is possible.

- Ambient findability - The concept of ‘ambient findability’ is defined from the perspective of always-already being immersed within the content of the archive. It seeks connections without hierarchies and fluidity that is not predicated upon pre-established categories. It assumes that if content is exhaustively tagged – both in its quantitative and qualitative dimensions – unanticipated synergies and relationships may emerge.

VOICEOVER believes the curatorial guidelines should be set by a committee, not by the design team. Though the jury advised otherwise, the design team strongly believes curation exceeds the purview and proper place of architects and will be best handled by a diverse and knowledgeable group. The curatorial guidelines will establish the following: the allowable subject matter; allowable modes of representation (whether fiction, poetry, etc. is permitted); the lengths of stories; appropriate participants; allowable languages; etc. While VOICEOVER, as a competition entry took a very liberal position on these subjects, we believe ultimately the guidelines should not represent our positions alone. The best estimation of the composition of this curatorial committee will comprised of: members of appropriate federal agencies including the National Park Service, National Capitol Planning Commission, Fine Arts Commission; historians familiar with Washington, D.C. and national memorials; interested members of the public.

The collected archive is created from stories recorded in person or online.
Dissemination

"The parrot symbolizes the story-teller’s art."
Paul Carter, *The Parrot*

VOICEOVER is lastly the design of a physical memorial overlay through which the archive’s collected spatial stories get told to visitors at the sites of the stories themselves. To do this VOICEOVER will employ a roving flock of bright pink parrot-like automated storytellers that collect and hover high above (~20’) each site. Periodically, one of the storytellers would drop low enough to be audible at street-level. In the words and voice of the original author, their recorded site story gets relayed to a collected crowd. Each site becomes the place of active engagement between a physical location and a real-time spoken story. Each site’s original meaning gets expanded through the cacophony of added memories. Rather than a single unified view, VOICEOVER seeks to give voice to the diverging understandings and conflicting perspectives of a multi-cultural society.
[WHY PARROTS?]
- Parrots, like most Americans, are not indigenous to the United States.
- Parrots neither speak in the wild, nor do they mimic the sounds of other birds, they only speak in captivity.
- Parrots are critical players in the discourse on colonization, as specimens of the exotic that instigate further political conquest.
- Parrots are ersatz conversants, surrogate partners in dialogue, but as stand-ins what they represent is the human desire to speak to ourselves.

[WHY VOCALIC?]
- Historically, urban design has privileged the visual. Sixtus V’s Rome, Haussman’s Paris, and L’Enfant’s Washington, D.C. are all urban plans predicated upon visual affinities and perspectival connections.
- VOICEOVER attempts to augment this paradigm by producing a vocalic overlay for the monuments of Washington, D.C. that generates alternative readings to the predominant master narratives of these commemorative works.
- Steven Conners - *Dumbstruck: A Cultural History of Ventriloquism*: "Vocalic space signifies the ways in which the voice is held both to operate in, and itself to articulate, different conceptions of space, as well as to enact different relations between the body, community, and time. What space means, in short, is very
largely a function of the perceived powers of the body to occupy and extend itself through its environment. The meaning of human space is changed drastically when it becomes possible to inhabit and command with one’s voice an auditory range far larger than that prescribed the limits of the naturally audible.”

- Stories are the primary currency of history.

- Two currents of thinking have informed the contemporary practice of history. The ancient Latin, *historia*, references the drama of the chronological narrative; whereas, the modern German, *geschichte*, emerged with the nineteenth-century rise of the social sciences and the desire for history to be positivist, factual, and evidentiary.

- VOICEOVER’s emphasis on stories and oral histories is positioned to counter this recent positivist turn in historiography, once again emphasizing the spoken word and the voice, with all of its quirks, intonations, and inflections.

- We are interested in the voice’s capacity to inscribe and delimit space, to create its own audiences and constituencies, to activate dialogue through contrary opinions, oppositions, and dissent.

- We want to create a robust repository of oral histories that are salient precisely because they eschew the visual and the imagistic, narratives that are powerful because they invest in the currency of diverse voices and multiple points of view.

[WHY STORIES?]

“The idea used to be that coherency in the historical narrative was given by cultural patterns. But as narrative theory shows us, narrative coherency is a poetic creation given by the historian. To some people this sounds like a submission to relativism, but that’s not what I mean. It is possible to tell several different stories about the past, and there is no way, finally, to check them against the fact of the matter. The criterion for evaluating them is moral or poetic.”

Hayden White, *The Fiction of Narrative*
**Phasing**

Given that VOICEOVER will require an estimated 5-10 year start-up, we designed a preliminary phase to give time for the Curated Collection to be amassed, funding to be raised, and enthusiasm for the future project to be garnered. This phase would use a simple pink kite we designed to symbolize the joyful parrots that will ultimately replace them; at the same time, these kites can serve as an inexpensive crowd-funding tool.

**The Future**

If design is always a means to envisioning a future scenario, it can (but doesn’t always) offer a critical alternative to an existing “normal.” VOICEOVER then, if it is to be taken as an implementable proposition, is also a critical project on the basis that it offers several points of contended difference with present-day memorial practices and policies.

First, VOICEOVER is a memorial that is dependent on public input. It is, in fact, improved through greater public participation. Where most other present-day memorial projects are single-issue and largely representative of the interests of well-funded individuals, VOICEOVER is a bottom-up strategy, representative of a large, multilayered and messy amalgamation.

VOICEOVER is lightweight and semi-ephemeral. Where in the past memorials were heavy and thick to signal their permanence, VOICEOVER is deliberately shortening its own lifespan so as to acknowledge the overlay of an era’s contemporary ideas onto historical ones. In other words, just because we have memorials from two hundred years ago, that doesn’t mean we are receiving the ideas that conceived/built those monuments. VOICEOVER will not last as long as older memorials, at least not physically; this is a means of acknowledging the temporal limits on its own ability to be comprehended.

VOICEOVER is adaptable and unpredictable. It can keep up with the speed at which we receive information and at the same time go to places we don’t yet know. Because we cannot forecast the nature of the stories it will include, we will never fully know the “shape” of VOICEOVER. As such, it may lead us just as much as we lead it.

Lastly, VOICEOVER is joyful. Where some of the stories told may be quite somber, the real method of our madness, so to speak, is to engage people through a language of delight so that they may be open to dialogues in which they don’t normally participate and to opinions which they don’t themselves hold. We believe active tolerance may actually have a color – bright pink.

**The Other Future**

“[Design Fiction] is a kind of halfway between fact and fiction [...] telling stories that appear real and legible, yet that are also speculating and extrapolating, or offering some sort of reflection on how things are or how they might become something else.”


Given that VOICEOVER exists in a medium designed for expansive speculation and projective storytelling, the architectural “future of” competition, the project, in this light, is not meant at all as an implementable solution. In fact, implementation is at odds with this type of competition, which, in its best form, is reaching beyond our present capacities for implementation and aiming instead to shape a future. Taken as a “design fiction,” an invented and inventive provocation, VOICEOVER, then, is meant to be catalytic and heuristic of a new set of conceptions and processes, which are not yet possible so as to be not just a future memorial but to address the higher aspiration of the competition, the future of memorials. VOICEOVER, unshackled by implementability, is a prop through which to imagine a version of the world that could not have been imagined without it.
Appendix:
Budget for Research and Development, Initial Investments, and Maintenance

The VOICEOVER project needs three phases of funding. The budget that follows is a preliminary attempt at figuring out the ranges costs of each phase. There is a 100% contingency added to the calculations to account for nature of this speculation.

Phase 1: Research and Development $2,000,000 - $4,000,000
This phase is where the parrots’ figuration, technology, and behavior is designed and resolved. Because unmanned aviation vehicles have been in development for a while, the technology is well resolved at this point.

Phase 2: Initial Investment $3,300,000 - $6,600,000
In this phase 200 parrots are purchased, their operating infrastructure is designed and installed, and the archival recording equipment is purchased. These purchases are considered one-time-only. Their eventual replacements are figured into the Maintenance Phase. One of the advantages of the VOICEOVER scheme is that the parrots can be purchased piecemeal.

Phase 3: Maintenance Per Year $1,900,000 - $3,800,000
This phase includes the operations, maintenance, and long-term replacement plans for the archive and parrots.

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Notes

1 See, for example, the modifications made to the FDR memorial with the addition of a bronze figure of Roosevelt in a wheelchair. Disabilities rights groups campaigned for the addition of this later sculpture in order to reveal the "truer" physical nature of the president's body, a contemporary concern.

2 StoryCorps is the national oral archiving project that collects and preserves the stories of everyday people.

3 The term "design fiction" is widely used in many branches of design, engineering, and future studies. The term here is partial to Julian Bleecker's version. Julian Bleecker is an engineer and designer who studies the relationships between science fiction and what he terms "science fact" through film. And he is interested in the peculiar objects, the "Design Fictions," that mediate the crossing of that boundary. The Star Trek flip phone, for example, or the 2001: A Space Odyssey computer tablet (which looks exactly like Apple’s iPad) are science fiction creations that were, in their era, not yet possible. The technology wasn’t available, sure, but more than that, the mere possibility wasn’t either. I mean to say that the possibility of the future technology [cell phones, tablet computers] was opened, and even prefigured, by the Design Fiction projected in the movie. And, I mean also to align our work with this kind of speculation on the future – a story of a scenario not yet possible put into play so as to offer a new direction, as yet unknown, for the future.

Influential Writings and Precedents

The following projects and writings, among many, were particularly informative to the VOICEOVER project.

WRITINGS

On Collective Memory
Marc Auge. *Oblivion.*

Maurice Halbwachs. *On Collective Memory*
“"It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize and reorganize their memories."

Pierre Nora. "Les Lieux de Mémoire"

On Memorials
Andrea Doss. *Memorial Mania*

Sanford Levinson. *Written in Stone*

Lewis Mumford. “Death of the Monument”

Robert Musil. “Monuments”
“"There is nothing so invisible as a monument [...] Anything that endures over time sacrifices its ability to make an impression. Anything that constitutes the walls of our life, the backdrop of our consciousness, so to speak, forfeits its capacity to play a role in that consciousness..."

Kirk Savage. *Monument Wars*

Kirk Savage. *Standing Soldiers Kneeling Slaves*

Kirk Savage. "When the Ivory Tower Meets the Real World:"
“If we accept that history and memory are symbiotic, the corollary is that neither can be fixed, neither can be held in place. Revisionism becomes the norm, rather than something to be feared or deplored.”

James E. Young. *The Texture of Memory*

James E. Young. “Memory and Counter-Memory”
On Sound and Voice


On Plural Histories, Storytelling, and Storytellers
Carl L. Becker. “Everyman His Own Historian.”


Paul Carter. *Parrot.*

“The parrot symbolizes the story-teller’s art.”


“Today, curating as a profession means at least four things. It means to preserve, in the sense of safeguarding the heritage of art. It means to be the selector of new work. It means to connect to art history. And it means displaying or arranging the work. But it’s more than that. Before 1800, few people went to exhibitions. Now hundreds of millions of people visit them every year. It’s a mass medium and a ritual. The curator sets it up so that it becomes an extraordinary experience and not just illustrations or spatialized books.”


“The idea used to be that coherency in the historical narrative was given by cultural patterns. But as narrative theory shows us, narrative coherency is a poetic creation given by the historian. To some people this sounds like a submission to relativism, but that’s not what I mean. It is possible to tell several different stories about the past, and there is no way, finally, to check them against the fact of the matter. The criterion for evaluating them is moral or poetic.”

VISUAL PROJECTS

Shimon Attie. The Writing on the Wall. Photographic projections of the Holocaust era in Berlin’s Jewish Quarter.

Richard Barnes, Photographic Series, contemporary Civil War Re-enactments.

Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller. Audio walks.

Lee Friedlander, American Monument, Photographic Series, absorption of past monuments into contemporary life.

Antony Gormley, One and the Other, fourth plinth project in Trafalgar Square, London, where for one month randomly chosen participants were given the fourth plinth as a public stage.

Troy Hillman, Memorial to the Closet, architectural proposal for a temporary memorial to homosexual rights for Washington D. C.

Markus Kison. Touched Echo. Audio installation depicting the sounds of war. Sound transmission done through the bones of the listeners. Dresden, Germany.

Maya Lin. Vietnam Veterans Memorial, Washington D.C.

Renata Stih and Frieder Schnock. Bus Stop Memorial. Competition proposal to make a bus route to the Holocaust sites as a memorial.

Krzysztof Wodiczko, Projection Projects.

Yurong Wu, Neither Here Nor There, architectural proposal for a memorial to the “back story” of the national monuments for Washington D.C., 2014.

Credits
All collages are the work of the VOICEOVER team. The figure drawings included in the collages are influenced by the illustartions of Marion Fayolle.