1) EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ethnographic research “informed by theories of sensory perception” (Pink, 2010, p331) is undoubtedly an “emerging trend” in anthropology (Nakamura, 2013, p.132). Described by David Howes as “one of the most exciting developments in recent anthropology” (2010, p.338), it presents the opportunity to rethink established ethnographic practices and calls for interdisciplinary collaboration. But what methods can we use to investigate the role the multisensoriality of experience might play in shaping cultural phenomena?

The digital archive and its relationships with the study of community and culture are also generating academic interest as developments in digital technology facilitate new ways of accessing archival materials and new methods of co-creation. The infrastructure of the digital archive as “community memory” (Sugimoto, 2014), the ways in which the creation of a digital archive “alters the geography of community heritage production” (Beel et al., 2014) and the challenges presented by “cultural organisations wanting to take charge of the multimodal telling of their own histories” (Carlin, 2014), all suggest recent developments in the relationships between the digital archive, community and culture. But is an archive that contains a collection of objects of significance abstracted from their original context the most appropriate format, when the lived experience of a community is so vivid, connected and multisensory?

LOCATION OF STUDY

Temple Works was selected as the location of the pilot study. It is a building of great historical and cultural significance, located in the Holbeck area of South Leeds. Originally constructed in 1840 as a flax mill, the building has a number of signature features. The industrialist John Marshall had a fascination with Egyptology and therefore designed a facade for the building inspired by the Temple of Horus in Edfu. It was also said to have the largest single room in the world at the time of construction. One room inside Temple Works is two acres in size.

The rationale for selecting Temple Works as a locus of academic enquiry can be made with regard to the past, present and future.

PAST

As the only Grade I listed building in South Leeds, Temple Works is formally identified as a location of great historical significance. Constructed by an important figure in the industrial revolution and the location of numerous architectural and manufacturing innovations, the building is an effective method of accessing the industrial past of the region. The site provides an ideal opportunity for academic projects related to heritage, public engagement and the archive.

PRESENT

During the initial phase of the pilot study, Temple Works was home to a cultural project that supported a wide range of creative practitioners: artists, musicians, performers and theatre groups. The project made an important contribution to the region, providing a space that inspired creative collaborations. The location of the cultural project within such an unconventional space suggested academic study in the fields of ethnography, cultural geography and environmental psychology.
Towards the end of the pilot study, the sale of Temple Works (and the surrounding area) was agreed and the cultural project was required to vacate the building. It could be argued that this development created a crucial moment for intervention, producing impactful research that offers a critical perspective on the processes of transition. The funds from this pilot study made it possible to realise this important contribution at this critical juncture.

The funding awarded for this pilot study made it possible to realise a piece of practical work that directly addresses the intended aims of the project. The existing spatial and visual archive (created before this pilot project) was transformed into a multisensory archive, including 360° binaural sound recordings. This unique development was achieved through the creation of bespoke web software and the purchase of experimental hardware, as requested in the proposal.

This pilot study has successfully illustrated that a multisensory virtual archive can be used as an ethnographic research method. Not only did the archive created as part of the pilot study prove effective in engaging research participants in the co-creation of knowledge regarding the sensory experience of the site, it has also garnered significant academic interest in the disciplines of anthropology, materiality and the digital archive (as evidenced by the research outputs). This pilot study has also achieved impact through public engagement both through a series of external events and by making the resulting archive accessible from anywhere in the world.
4) KEY ISSUES

“This is an emergent field, with new opportunities to respond to the challenges of finding ways to communicate in ways that are comprehensible to scholarly and public audiences about sensory ways of knowing in other people’s worlds.” (Pink, 2010)

As Pink (2010) highlights, an opportunity clearly exists to create new methods for the production and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge that relates to sensory experience. Existing methods of participant observation and interview could be rethought and new tools and techniques could be developed in an effort to rescue the ineffable, tacit and embodied knowledge gained during research encounters in the field. The multisensory and immersive methods developed as part of this study might be one contribution to this ongoing discussion.

The auditory features added to the archive project might also speak to a growing concern regarding the ocularcentric nature of so many studies of culture. (See Classen (1997), Rodaway (2013), Low (2015) and many others.) In attempting to create workable multisensory research methods, the dominance of vision might be brought into question.

The new methods being developed might generate new avenues of enquiry that could have a significant impact upon the practices of ethnography. Making such vivid records of the research encounter available as part of the publication process encourages authorial humility and a reflexive approach to the production of ethnographic knowledge. It might also facilitate a more dialogic approach to the study of culture, engaging research participants in new ways. Most significantly though, these methods speak to ongoing debates regarding ethnography and description. The reliance on textual methods of disseminating the findings of ethnographic results and the potential for an “excess of description” (Poole, 2005) has been a contentious issue since the development of the ‘writing culture’ of Clifford Geertz (1973).

“It is not just that language directs us away from the sensate, but, more severely, it develops in us a partial inability to sense.” (Tucker and Goodings, 2014)

5) NEXT STEPS

The next step for this project is to add participatory features. If the virtual archive could be developed into a collaborative platform, the traditional paradigms for the production of ethnographic knowledge might be significantly altered. Allowing experiences of the field of study to be accessed, analysed and contributed to from anywhere in the world, the authorial control of the ethnographer may be reduced and the collaborative construction, interpretation and contestation of narratives, memories and potential futures must be embraced. This concept of a multisensory and participatory archive has already generated significant interest. A paper entitled ‘The role of multisensory, embodied and participatory media in the production and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge’ has been accepted to the 2016 conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists and potential funding opportunities have been discussed with The Science Museum and an AHRC theme leader.
6) IMPACT

The pilot study has had impact related to academia, industry, policy making and public engagement.

ACADEMIC

The following conference papers and research seminars all relate to the work produced during this pilot study, demonstrating how widely the research findings have been disseminated:

Jackson, T. 2015. Multisensory and Participatory Archives: Embodiment, Spatiality and the Collaborative Construction of Memories In: Sensory Cartographies University of Greenwich.


Jackson, T. [Forthcoming]. The role of multisensory, embodied and participatory media in the production and dissemination of ethnographic knowledge In: Visualizing futures: audio-visual practices for a contemporary anthropology. University of Milano-Bicocca.

In June 2016, Yoko Akama (Associate Professor, RMIT University, Melbourne) visited Temple Works to host a workshop on the theme of 'uncertainty'. Dr. Helen Thornham (Principal Investigator of the CCN+), Dr. Edgar Gómez Cruz (Research Fellow of the CCN+) and I co-hosted the event, demonstrating a shared interest in Temple Works as a locus of academic research.

I feel uncertain when / about ...

Disrupting spaces/disciplines: A workshop about uncertainty in an uncertain space.

On Monday 22nd June the Communities & Culture Network+ will be hosting a workshop to explore the theme of uncertainty in an uncertain space. Temple Works, Leeds. The aim of this workshop will be to generate a practical output in response to the theme and the space. The workshop will be hosted by Dr Yoko Akama, Principal Investigator of the Design + Ethnography + Futures project at RMIT University (Melbourne, Australia).

The theme of 'uncertainty' is a provocation to explore, imagine, interrogate, critique and immerse into the unknown in order to disrupt our disciplinary approaches/frameworks to be able to think and imagine possible futures. This provocation is also intended to respond and intervene in the space of Temple Works, a Grade 1 listed Victorian former flax mill that once made history with ‘the largest room in the world’. The lengthy (and uncertain) repair period necessary for such a unique structure has given local and regional artists the opportunity to test the site’s spatial qualities and choreography.

Participants in the workshop will include musicians, activists, photographers, ethnographers, and social scientists interested in ethnography, design, future and uncertainty.

INDUSTRY

The virtual archive project not only contributed to academic research but also served as an invaluable tool in promoting the use of Temple Works (helping to generate revenue important to the survival of the cultural project). Having made such a strong contribution to Temple Works, the PI of this project was offered the position of ‘artist in residence’. This privileged position not only made it possible to offer further contributions to the cultural project but also granted ongoing access to the site, essential to the success of the ethnographic research project.

POLICY MAKING

The virtual archive created during this pilot study has been invaluable in informing decisions related to the proposed sale and regeneration of the Temple Works site. Leeds City Council, the Temple Works cultural project and commercial investors have used
the project in developing a strategy for the future of the site. As the changes in ownership and plans for the future are negotiated, the project has offered a critical perspective on the cultural value of spaces like Temple Works (and the impact any redevelopment might have on it). Significant weight has been added to the argument that the regeneration should be sympathetic to the current sensory experience of the site.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

Although the exhibition and symposium proposed as part of this project could not be organised due to the potential changes in the ownership of Temple Works, many other public engagement activities have taken place, or are planned for the near future.

In September 2015, the virtual archive project was selected for exhibition at the Digital Design Weekend at the V&A. This high profile event allowed the project to be demonstrated to academic colleagues, industry practitioners and the general public. Over 9,000 visitors attended over two days. Not only did this event generate increased academic interest in the project, raise the profile of the CCN+ and result in the submission of a large cross-university research funding application, it also illustrated that the project is relatable for a broad audience:

In June 2016, an exhibition of projects created at Temple Works is being held at Leeds Central Library as a legacy of the cultural project. With funding from Leeds City Council and the support of many previous ‘artists in residence’, the exhibition hopes to celebrate the contribution that the project made to the creative and cultural community of South Leeds.

FUNDING

At this time, the project has not yet been awarded any follow-on funding. However, the tools developed as part of this pilot study were a key component in a large, cross-university RCUK/Innovate UK bid. Although the bid was unsuccessful the innovative methods that we proposed were congratulated.

Tom Jackson

t.jackson@leeds.ac.uk
0113 343 1117
media.leeds.ac.uk/people/tom-jackson


