

Memorials Communication Exhibit

Curatorial Statement

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## Memorials Communication Exhibit: Curatorial Statement

History of Communication Technologies has introduced me to concepts I had never before considered to be communication at all. I even discovered technologies that weren't particularly highlighted by the class at all. In Module 3, through a Micro-History assignment, I was introduced to the tsunami stones of Japan. This topic may have been one of the more difficult topics to research, as I found there to be little to no history analysis of these stones at all, as highlighted by a study done by Garnier and Lahournat (2022). It seemed that the history behind the stones was kept as undocumented folklore and stories within the communities they occupied.

Studying the tsunami stones opened a perspective on a different type of communication, which might be considered a "genre" more than a technology: memorials. My research helped me realize that, although the intentionality of a tsunami stone's text is commonly a written warning to future residents, there was often an unwritten functionality in the memorial of previous residents who perished in these tsunamis. I made a connection to our textbook, *Text technologies: A history*, which states "text comprises signs, symbols, or sounds of any kind that intentionally convey meaning" (Treharne & Willan, 2019, p. 1). This concept triggered a spark in my brain that made me realize how memorials are great examples of how countless methods and materials can be used to communicate a multitude of thoughts and messages.

It did not take much more thought to decide that I wanted my exhibit to showcase various memorials, some of which I have visited, to show how a memorial can take any object and turn it into a text, with varying intentionality, functionality, and materiality.

### **The Exhibit**

Memorials are, as the name implies, in memoriam of a particular event, person, or item. One may think, then, that such an exhibit would be ordered chronologically in order of said event or person's existence, or grouped by memorial category (disaster, triumph, people). I realized that such an arrangement would be inappropriate for an exhibit that highlights the meanings behind the memorials themselves, rather than the events they represent. I chose to instead arrange the exhibit in order of the erection or dedication of each memorial, placing more focus on the memorial itself. The September 11 Memorial, for example, memorializes events that occurred in 2001. It is placed after the New Orleans Katrina Memorial of 2008, though, as the September 11 memorial wasn't dedicated until 2011.

### **For the Visitors**

My goal for this exhibit was for visitors to consider communication from other-than-conventional points of view, as I had similarly discovered. I first was sure to give context behind every memorial's purpose, usually a brief description of the event or people being memorialized. I then wanted to convey how a memorial can communicate a thought through a bridge, like the Arlington Memorial and Silver Memorial Bridges, or through a tree, like at the September 11 Memorial's Survivor Tree, or a water feature, like at the Oklahoma City National Memorial. All of these memorials also contain conventional text technologies, such as plaques. But an intentionally-preserved unlikely surviving tree, with a new function as a symbol of resilience, creates an unsuspecting form of communication from an existing material. I want the visitor to embrace this thought and realize that communication can be created from nearly anything, as simple as it may seem. And yet, the seemingly-simple object is capable of communicating a truly powerful statement.

### **Exhibit Selection**

The number of memorials in the world is likely countless, especially if one considers each cemetery headstone to be a memorial of a deceased person. It would be unreasonable and impossible to include every memorial in one exhibit. I wanted to include a number of different types of memorials, from different regions, eras, size, and shape, to try to provide a variety of materials and functionality, and, in some cases, intentionality.

Out of the 11 memorials selected, I have personally visited three. These are The Lion's Mound at the Battle of Waterloo 1815, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and the Alamogordo Airborne Monument. The one that stands out to me the most is the Oklahoma City National Memorial. This memorial features intentionality and functionality in nearly every material on-site. I only listed a few examples of symbolism at this memorial, although there are so many more fantastic examples that I chose to include a link to the memorial's website which highlights many of the other symbolic materials at the memorial. Even more significantly, there is an accompanying book available for purchase diving even deeper into the symbolism used at the memorial. The Oklahoma City Memorial is a prime example of how a simple object, such as a wall, can be transformed into an object of communication. I could go on and on about this memorial, but luckily there is a museum on-site that has done most of that work for me.

### **Exhibit Research and Future Study**

Many of the artifacts I chose to include in my exhibit had extensive supporting websites with well-documented history and other pertinent information. A few others, though, had very little information. Examples included the Aneyoshi tsunami stone, the Alamogordo Airborne Monument, and the New Orleans Katrina Memorial. Much of the information I retrieved for these memorials was either from visitors, public databases, or reporters. I feel that I was able to

retrieve enough information for my exhibit, but I can't help but wonder if there may have been additional information about a memorial which may have been useful in my exhibit, but perhaps was not available to me.

These thoughts relate to what was pointed out in my introduction about the tsunami stones of Japan; the lack of information behind the stones. Unfortunately, much of the information behind the erection of those stones is long gone. Some opportunities for further study of the memorials I've highlighted remain to be seen, and could be carried out before the memorials' age leads to a loss of information, and a sense of ignorance falls over the communities, similar to the history of the tsunami stones. As this exhibit was simply a small class project, I don't expect it to rise up to fill this void. Perhaps, though, if I were a professional curator with more time and resources, I may consider taking on such a task.

### **Conclusion**

The study of communication technologies in this course has given me insight to many of the obstacles we have overcome toward effective communication, which was to be expected at the beginning of this course. I did not expect, though, to have gained an appreciation of how an ordinary object can be used in so many ways to communicate through symbolism, as long as it has intentionality and functionality. Take, for instance, a park bench. Whatever this bench is made of, its material alone is simply a bench to sit on. However, if that bench was made with the intention of dedicating it to a person, suddenly it functions as an acknowledgement of that person's existence, and becomes a form of communication.

I hope my exhibit, a slideshow of various memorials, communicates how communication can come in many forms, and how one object can communicate so many things, without a single spoken or written word.

**References**

- Garnier, E., & Lahournat, F. (2022). Japanese stone monuments and disaster memory – perspectives for DRR. *Disaster Prevention and Management: An International Journal*, 31(6), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1108/dpm-03-2021-0089>
- Treharne, E., & Willan, C. (2019). *Text technologies : A history*. Stanford University Press.