Telling Stories of Site

The Case of Lifta, Jerusalem

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Introduction

The life cycle of cultural heritage site typically includes a long history of transformation since its inception, through its continuous development, and destruction, and finally, its rebuilding. Such transformations produce one challenge for archaeologists, who excavate the layers of the site’s remains and conject development, and another for conservationists who identify, preserve and perhaps reconstruct its presumed authentic state. Moreover, these transformations are not limited to that of physical forms. Indeed, a cultural heritage site is always a place for past activities, experiencing generation and loss of different uses and points of views with each change of hands. These cultural and historical multiplicities then, present a challenge for any cultural heritage practice aiming at making its history and narratives available to a public audience.

This paper introduces a recent cultural heritage project in the disputed and evacuated settlement of Lifta near Jerusalem, in order to discuss how contemporary technology tools can make an intervention in a complex social and political context. The pipeline of cultural heritage practice includes field-based data collection, processing and interpretation, and distribution, in which technological tools are critical. For data collection, use of photogrammetric capturing and panoramic video recordings, for example, are non-intrusive, and are efficient means to rapidly collect forms and events on the site. For data processing, an online platform can help members of the team practice sharing geo-located data and design multi-faceted representation of site in question. And for the public audience, narratives about cultural heritage can be developed through interactive digital tools such as game engine environment in the service of distributing multimedia contents (such as 3d capture, video, and audio for different sensory experiences), embedding different stories that represent multiple points of view, and accommodating the participation of those who are interested in making comments and sharing their personal points of views.

About Lifta

The village of Lifta is situated below the slopes of the number 1 Highway leading into Jerusalem. ow uninhabited, Lifta exists today as the preserved remains of a Palestinian village, the history of which stretches all the way to the late Bronze Age. Studies show that the village has biblical origins, while some mark it as a resting point in the military campaign of a thirteenth-century BC Pharaoh. During the Ottoman period, Lifta was in the major agricultural hinterland of Jerusalem and had an extensive array of olive presses, flour mills and flourishing lands. In 1948, during Israel’s War of Independence, the village’s Palestinian inhabitants escaped to East Jerusalem and other West Bank villages, as the village and its environs were taken over by Israeli military forces. In the 1950s, Jewish immigrant families from Yemen and Kurdistan were resettled by the Israeli government in the then empty structures in the village, only to be removed by the government 25 years later, making them effectively the last inhabitants of the site.

Among countless uninhabited archeological sites of its period in present-day Israel, Lifta is the only remaining Palestinian village to survive with fully developed structures, in a remarkably complete condition, yet while at the same time remaining uninhabited for several decades.

The village’s past and present offer a unique opportunity for the creation of a richly contextual scholarship. Due to the site’s complex and often ignored or manipulated history, there is an important potential role for historical research that exposes both the site’s various pasts and the contentious relationship between different narrative stories. Lifta is at once local and representative. It represents transformations, attitudes and cultural shifts pertaining to the city of Jerusalem, the State of Israel, Palestine and the region at large.
Exposing competing histories through new technology will demonstrate in a special manner that historical, material and cultural compositions of archeological sites generally contain a multiplicity of narratives accumulated through time.

There has been extensive data collection by The Save Lifta Coalition with collaboration of the Bezalel Academy for Art and Design in Jerusalem. Composed of dozens of activists of different backgrounds, including Palestinians, Israelis, researchers, political, environmental and social activists. The coalition was formed in 2010, to combat, in part, the city’s 6036 construction plan that threatens the village’s integrity, and aims to restructure it as a luxury residential area in the city’s outskirts.

**Digital Archeology / Virtual Narratives - Collaboration project between MIT Architecture and Ben Gurion University, Be’er Sheva, Israel.**

In June 2019 a collaborative workshop brought together the resources and expertise of the MIT Department of Architecture and the Ben Gurion University Department of Bible, Archeology and the Ancient Near Eastern Studies, for undertaking an interdisciplinary study of the material remains of Lifta. The collaboration was intended to build up on the intrinsic relationship that both disciplines share and differ in, in respect to notions and ideas of site, temporality and imagination. Indeed, both disciplines draw upon the material reality of a site presence in order to imagine it in a different time. While architects are preoccupied with the design and production of future scenarios, archaeologists are committed to the unequivocal determination of the antiquity of things. Still, both fields deal with the fundamental question of how to conjure up an image of a place, whether by recollecting lost events or by speculating about future possibilities. The collaborative workshop aimed to use both the affinities and gaps between the disciplines as productive in order to produce unique immersive representations of the site.

Lifta and its varying narratives are symbolic of the war on material history in Jerusalem, conducted through archaeological excavation and polemic writing, rendering the ruins of Lifta a tool in geo-political conflicts. Instead of letting an archaeological site in this region to constitute proof of precedence or ownership by any one nation, ethnic group or religion, this workshop, through design analysis and visualization methods, aimed at constructing a multivalent and complex model of the Lifta’s past. Lifta thus becomes a site constituted of multiple layers of political, design and cultural histories, representing a multifaceted narrative.

**Data integration and distribution platform**

The Design Heritage platform (Nagakura et al. 2018) is an online tool to present 3D captured photogrammetry models along with other types of evidence about the site, and is open to the public to add multimedia data, such as archival documents, video and audio captures of onsite events and tours, fieldwork documentation. The workshop used this platform to allow curation of storylines, which include different 3D models, onsite recordings, archival documents and notes. Through storylines the site can be imagined through various points-of-view, focusing on varying aspects of its heritage.
Fig. 1. Tour with Yaakub Uda a Palestinian refugee from Lifta at the site; in right image, screen-capture of the web based platform integrating 3D photogrammetry models at various scales, with archive materials as well as other types of evidence.

Conclusion

International communities have recognized the significance of digital cultural heritage practice as expressed in a series of historic charters. The Venice Charter (1964) aimed to safeguard important physical sites through conservation and restoration efforts, while the UNESCO Paris Charter (2003) advocated protection and accessibility of digital content from books, artworks to monuments as information for all. More recently, the Seville Principles (2010) provided framework for creation of authentic visualization of cultural heritage.

In light of these, the underlying objective of heritage practices is to identify or create authentic content and to preserve it, either in physical or digital form, as “information for all”. Therefore, the processes employed to warrant authenticity and appropriate methods for preservation of sites are key topics in these charters.

Nevertheless, in order to animate these sites, remains and histories, and to draw them out of their digital vaults, the aim of a digital cultural heritage practice must foster a means to make these sites public through developing a means of delivering narratives that are associated and stem from the site.

The case of Lifta demonstrates not only the technological capacity of contemporary digital tools for rapid onsite recordings, but rather complements those by critically reflecting on new ways in which digital heritage is created, and suggesting novel ways for its circulation, experience and shared use. Through the use of online collaboration and interactive presentations, the multiplicity of narrative histories and viewpoints become as inherent to the understanding of the site as are its material remains. It produces a representation that is rich and diverse in its archival sources and one that, through community participation, holds the potential to grow and evolve through time. Such a representation has a chance to complement the outcome of traditional practice of cultural heritage project and bring a new value to a cultural heritage itself. At stake is not only a precise documentation of historical remains and evidence, but rather the establishment of access for new publics to new forms of knowledge, and to multiple pasts.

References

