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Choosing materials for a guiding by things.

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Abstract

This paper addresses negotiated human and non-human agencies during a project to provide ‘inanimate’ designed and crafted objects to operate as tour guides in a site of heritage tourism. It approaches these agencies from perspectives informed by neo-vitalism, Jane Bennett’s ideas about ‘vibrant matter’ and recent discussions around phenomenology. It seeks to engage how things might have effective presence over and beyond the descriptions, reproductions and affects they generate in humans. It begins to ask what might happen if such a presence were recruited as a tour guide, navigating the materiality, narratives and metaphors of a heritage site for a human visitor.

In the paper we have approached these issues through an experimental project to create a tour guided by objects that we call ‘things-meanings’. The site for this tour was the early twentieth century Castle Drogo designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, now a National Trust property in Devon (UK) and popular tourism venue. The paper describes how the objects were designed, fabricated and produced, particularly in relation to choices around materials, and the interweaving of materials with narratives and metaphorical discourses already at work on the site.

Introduction

In this paper we address choices made around the use and agency of materials for an experimental project for making a guiding by things for a National Trust property, Castle Drogo in Devon (UK). As part of this project we sought to create a tour guided by objects, rather than by a guidebook, audio-guide or human guide. In making a tour guided by objects, we engaged with ideas from neo-vitalism, from Jane Bennett's advocacy for a vibrant matter – “the capacity of things.... [to] act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own” (viii) – and with “a post-human ontology, which delivers us from [an] obsolete legacy of thinking the world in terms of how it can be accessed for us” (Trigg, 3). We fabricated the term ‘thing-meaning’ from the work of anthropologists Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad and Sari Wastell who assert “that things might be treated as sui generis meanings” (3) as a way of engaging a ‘thing power’ that related not only to physical effects but also to significance and affect. We would become increasingly aware of the paradoxical dynamic between our own agency as a designer/maker and a dramaturg and the agency of the materials that we sought to recruit to our project.

Research & Materials

The first impulse for our project came in the form of an invitation from a National Trust officer to work in their Castle Drogo (Devon, UK) property. The Trust was experiencing issues around its interpretation and the expectation of their visitors. On wet days, the property often attracts holidaymakers away from the nearby beaches, many of whom are surprised, and often disappointed, to find a twentieth century private home rather than the ruins of a

medieval fortification. In order to address the ambivalence of the Castle's reception, we sought ways to turn the visitors attention to the present and material qualities of the Drogo site, rather than the absence of a presumed heritage.

We drew on, and sought to develop our methods from, a previous project we had made jointly for Plymouth Arts Centre's 2010 'Ambulation' exhibition at the Royal William Victualling Yard in Plymouth (Devon, UK), where we had sought to use objects – drawn both directly and obliquely (by historical or poetic association) from the materials of the site – as the crucial means for a visitor making an interpretation of their visit.

Our first and most important primary research into materials for use in our 'things-meanings' came from Castle Drogo itself. We jointly visited the castle a number of times before we had formed any clear ideas for the guide, discussing the character and ambience of the property as we walked around it. We were struck by the prevalence of the hard granite local to its setting in Dartmoor, taken from quarries just out of sight from the Castle. Walking around the grounds of the Castle, our impressions of the outer shell of the property were reinforced by the rugged, sub-volcanic geology of the landscape. In the interior we met with softer shapes and materials in the form of tapestries, oil paintings and an eclectic collection of different styles of furniture (the commissioning family had inherited Spanish-themed furnishings from a previous home and had moved them into Castle Drogo).

Despite this softening within, the overall ambience of the building remains dominated by the effects of the internal and external structures of the ubiquitous granite. The moods of the interior are determined often by the effects of light on materials, particularly when reflected by white feldspar, mica and quartz crystals in the granite. Natural light is used to create spectacle; little sunlight penetrates some of the inner corridors, while one staircase is flooded with light from a two storey window. Effects are determined as much by the weather of the

day as the architect's intentions; a shadowy and relentless corridor can be transformed into something more like a crystal cave by a sudden emergence of the sun from behind clouds.

We also observed natural light at work in the transformation and decay of furnishings, while artificial lights were used to reinforce the juxtapositions of symbols and arrangements of decorative objects.

From our first visit it became clear that granite would feature strongly within the work; as we began to research the history of the site it also became clear that the role of this rock was less even and more controversial than we had at first assumed. The apparent 'honest' solidity of the granite quickly revealed itself, within the contexts of our project, as a more ambivalent agent than we had imagined.

Castle Drogo, 'the last castle to be built in England', was commissioned in 1910 by Julius Drewe (originally Drew), owner of the Homes & Colonial Stores. His architect was Sir Edwin Lutyens. Building began in 1911, but was only completed in 1930, with delays caused by the First World War and the economic downturn of the 1920s. The apparent solidity of the granite materials belies a construction narrative of uncertainty, vulnerability and some conflict whose effect upon the locality was also dramatic; the recruitment and retraining of local farm workers as masons transforming the local economy. It also sustains and embodies the different intentions of architect and owner: Drewe's wish for a pseudo-medieval castle (so the day trippers are not wrong in their presumptions) in which to preside as an unofficial squire (he employed a genealogist to find local, aristocratic roots), and Lutyens's wish to create an authentic modern home rooted in and by its local materials.

Almost immediately after beginning our project, the National Trust started on a five year-long, large scale renovation project at Castle Drogo. The pointing between the granite blocks and the inadequately secured flat roof had been letting in rainfall for decades, and this was

beginning to catastrophically erode the metal skeleton of the Castle, while the granite blocks themselves were absorbing moisture. We witnessed at close hand the Castle's apparently immovable and permanent granite structure being disassembled part by part; expanses of large granite blocks numbered and laid out across the grounds.

Perhaps even more unexpectedly our researches revealed that parts of this solid structure had never materialised at all. Financial constraints had forced Lutyens to abandon approximately a third of the intended mass of the Castle. Invited, at least in part, to contest a narrative of absence perceived by visitors, we had discovered another one; not rooted in visitors' assumptions about heritage and timelines, but in the historical attenuation of a grand scheme. So it was that the first two of our guiding objects are not made of granite, but from materials that signal the absence of granite and the presence of unrealised ideas. A similar process guided the fabrication of the other things-meanings; involving exploration, touching and holding, discussion, research, drawing, making or prototypes and testing on site. In all, eight things-meanings were chosen/produced; designed, sourced, made and assembled, though not in that order, nor always in the same order of choice/production. Whilst each of the things-meanings, with the exception of thing-meaning 2, were intended as autonomous objects, they are made up of combinations of multiple narratives and materials (some of which, as with 1 and 2, are not present in the thing itself).

The Things-Meanings

Thing-meaning 1: a plywood laser cut 'ground plan'-level model of the never-built wing of the Castle. We chose plywood as being the most immediately recognisable and, at present, the most common of the materials used in the making of architectural models. At the time of the designing of Castle Drogo such models would have been constructed with either card or

balsa wood (and, indeed, Castle Drogo does possess a selection of balsa wood models of other Lutyens buildings, in storage at the time of writing). However, rather than seek historical accuracy or authenticity, we sought a material that, when held, would give us the most powerful physical association with planning and design. The evident fabrication of plywood, with the exposed cross-graining of its different layers, signals construction and manufacture, design and forethought over its natural origins; acting out an idea of something else, while hard and unbending in itself.

Thing-meaning 2: a plywood 'jigsaw' model of the entire intended, but never completed, ground plan for the Castle, into which thing-meaning 1 could be slotted (with multiple visitors using the things-meanings these could build up, one on top of another, to make something akin to a 3D model of the missing wing).

Our intention for a things-guided tour was to provide visitors with a set of objects that could lead them around Castle Drogo; recruiting materials that would redirect visitors from an imagined and illusory medieval castle to the shapes and symbols of the material Castle of Drewe and Lutyens. These objects were intended as offers of dialogic engagement to their human carriers; evoking contradictions and tensions around the intentions and constructions at Drogo, provoking symbolic connections and contemplations, but also directly affecting the visitor: chilling their hand, temporarily marking, inviting stroking, weighing heavily into the flesh of the palm, obliging a taking of responsibility for their care. To give detail and focus to the visitors' connection with the objects, and to facilitate the 'simple nuts and bolts' of the collection and return of the objects, we provided each visitor with a map consisting of an account of each object and a route; rather than provide this at the beginning of the route they were to pick up these maps a short way into the tour, so that for the first part of the tour they had only the first, second and third objects (and two simple instructions, one from a volunteer, and then another from a text by thing-meaning 2) to guide them.

Thing-meaning 3: a single piece of blue velvet cut in the hybrid shape of a fish and a glove; the fingers of the glove at one end, the head of the fish at the other. These blue ‘fish gloves’ brought together separate elements. The first two elements, the shapes of glove and fish, are taken from a portrait of Julius Drewe that is on display in the Castle. Drewe is dressed as a gentleman angler, and stands by a large landed salmon. At his feet is a fallen glove. Although we were unable to ascertain any precise significance for the fallen glove, it evoked something at odds with the stature of the figure and the symbol of a giant hooked, landed and conquered fish. The subject of the painting has a certain dominance over nature, and yet accident, forgetfulness, even struggle and loss are all hinted at in the dropping of the glove.

The blue velvet material allowed us to explicitly reference a vulnerability in the object, after we were drawn to the badly faded, light-damaged, blue velvet material of a long upholstered seat on a staircase, standing beneath a tall window. The damaged blue material directly connected the visitor to the vulnerability and ‘tragedy’ of the Castle’s hubristic project. Close at hand hangs another portrait; that of the intended heir to the Castle who would die from the effects of gassing during the First World War. In this painting, the first son is depicted as the nursery rhyme character Little Boy Blue.

While these narratives of vulnerability, and of an excessive ambition tripped up, are present in the signs and symbols of the house for the visitor to interpret, the blue velvet fish-glove directly and corporally affects the visitor. Longer than an ordinary glove, the thing-meaning spills over the hand of the visitor, only easily revealing its dual-shaping when held in both hands, and provoking an adjustment of the entire body of the visitor. What at first presents itself as something more playful and soft to the touch, in comparison to the preceding plywood things, quickly becomes elusive, slippery, troublesome and conflicted in the hand. Its playfulness, like the child’s dressing up as (or being dressed up as) a nursery rhyme character, is undermined by melancholy.

Thing-meaning 4: here granite, for the first time, appears in our objects. Not as a worked block, but as raw chips set in a cenotaph-like concrete object that references Lutyens' signature memorial design for the site of national commemorations of Britain's war dead in Whitehall, London. A shape, with the resonant association of an empty tomb, that is echoed in a key supporting structure deep in the basement level of the Castle; regularly passed, but mostly missed by visitors. This thing-meaning was made in two sizes, both designed to sit in, but not to fit, the palm of a hand. The concrete, constituting most of the object, we sympathetically darkened with dye to blend with the granite; but the rough shards of granite ('harvested' from the grounds of Drogo and presumably the revenant of the work of the building's original masons) are in tension with and stand proud from the smooth concrete cenotaph form. They scratch and mark the visitors hand; in their roughness they prod the visitor to remember the original raw material from which the castle has been built, to acknowledge its mass, power and vibrancy; both independent from and essential to Castle Drogo's symbolic structure.

Both thing-meaning 5, a spectacles frame similar to those habitually worn by the architect Lutyens, and thing-meaning 6, a miniature red 'billiards ball' set in a concrete slab with an arrow slit design taken from the Castle's 'battlements', operate mostly at the symbolic level; that latter accessed by the visitor only with the help of a volunteer and otherwise are kept concealed inside a decorative tin box within an existing secret wall compartment in one of the residential rooms. Things-meanings 7, however, impinge their materiality on the visitor. Pieces of granite from the castle grounds are wrapped with wire, in a cage-like pattern, and placed in small Tyvek string bags.

Tyvek is a high density synthetic material made of polyethylene fibres that is used to protect objects and larger structures during times of construction. Though soft to the touch, with one side having fleece-like properties and producing a sensation of 'keeping safe', the material is

remarkably strong. In larger forms it is used to preserve structures during times of construction (particularly relevant to us as Castle Drogo was almost entirely wrapped in protective sheeting during part of our project), providing a barrier to water/liquid whilst allowing air to flow freely; smaller sheets are used to wrap objects, as well as in the making of protective overalls.

The doubled layers around the granite, one of Tyvek and the other of wire, are ambivalent; the visitor can unwrap the first, but not the second. Both layers suggest a degree of protection; and yet they also obscure and imprison. The synthetic cloth has been used by the National Trust to protect artefacts during the ongoing renovation of the Castle, but this frustrates visitors who wish to experience the individual artefacts rather than the Christo-like display of their mass wrapping.

The wire around the granite not only references a large iron cage, still present at the Castle, that one of Julius Drewe's grandchildren would climb into and in which he could be dangled over the fake battlements (in order to make ineffective repairs to the Castle's stonework), but also a fictional equivalent: an image of Don Quixote caged, in a painting, 'inherited' with the other Spanish furnishings, from the Drewes' previous home. The wire wrapping turns the structure of the Castle inside out, exposing, just as the National Trust's renovation project does, a metal skeleton. Equally, the ambivalence of the double layering turns the renovation itself inside out and renders it, in turn, ambivalent; for, what is being preserved and conserved and for what reason? Modern membranes, equivalent to the Tyvek wrapping may secure the waterproofing, and thus the structural stability of the building, for up to a thousand years. Yet, is what is then memorialised the (now) modern materials of construction, rather than a historic artefact with its agency of decay? The doubly wrapped granite enacts, only partly-accessibly, the duality of its protection and denial.

Thing-meaning 8 is a hand-sized block of Dartmoor granite. A pair of vinyl footprints, in the floor of one of the upstairs rooms, directs the visitor to where they need to stand to get a view out beyond the Castle and in the direction of the moorland quarries from which the building's stone was taken. This final object, heavy enough to demand some work from a visitor who wishes for both the gaze and the tactility, pushes the visitor, after the synthesis and fabrication of the Tyvek bags, back to the raw material of the place and its sources.

Conclusion

Whilst it was our initial intention only to provide objects for the tour, we later added a map with written information for guidance to the route and for making precise the visitors' understanding of the things-meanings. This proved to be a retrograde step, which we have analysed in some detail elsewhere (Macpherson & Smith, forthcoming) and laid out our intentions for circumventing these self-inflicted obstacles in future.

Despite our close attention to the materiality as well as the significance of our objects, we had failed to grasp Sherry Turkle's warning that while we may be comfortable in considering "objects as useful or aesthetic.... We are on less familiar ground when we consider objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought" (5). In a context where "routine in-gazing practiced by professional disclosers" (and, as we had learned, by tourist-consumers also) tended to subdue "local color into... banal hues" (Marcus, 3), rather than allowing our objects the autonomy and agency inscribed in the ideas from which we were supposedly working – to act emotionally and intellectually upon the thoughts and feelings of visitors – we had failed to see our choice and assembling of materials as the end rather than the mid-point of our responsibilities. As a result, and ironically, we enacted with our map and

text the same ambivalent protecting/imprisoning upon our things-meanings as wire and Tyvek had upon raw granite.

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