

***Revealing History Through Design:
An Exploration of Pedagogy in Projects Rooted in Reconciliation and Remembrance***

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The Barcelona Conference on Education 2023
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

A broader historical narrative of the colonization of the southern United States is being told by historians such as Ric Murphy who in his book “The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia”, aims to recognize them and to “... ensure that their contributions and legacy no longer remain unknown in American History.” At the geographical seam between the North and South, Virginia is currently reconciling its history through writing and research but also through design. Design projects at Virginia universities such as The Hearth at the College of William & Mary, and the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at The University of Virginia have presented a vehicle for communities to discuss and reflect upon the uncovering and celebrating of hidden histories of people and place. Students have been at the core of these initiatives. Through ongoing research, this sensitive but important issue is explored through the eyes of educators and design students who share a robust commitment to move beyond mere building into the realm of history and humanities. Reconciliation and remembrance may be both an emotionally laden theme for design students, and a catalyst for moments of revelation, or a newly realized self-awareness that brings a sense of peace, or even perhaps – joy.

Keywords: Empathic Design, Community-Based Design, Reconciliation and Remembrance

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Introduction

Two completed reconciliation and remembrance projects – the Memorial to Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia and the Hearth at the College of William & Mary – serve as examples of how design can be a catalyst for the unveiling of hidden histories. They also tell a story of essential student engagement, providing design students an opportunity to learn a methodology rooted in an empathic and community-engaged design approach.

Much has been documented about the details of the projects in the form of articles, videos, and public presentations. Although it is important to re-state some of those facts, focusing on personal reflections of those involved, has allowed me to understand the outcomes more intimately. Through interviews, some of which were conducted at the memorial sites themselves, designers and educators involved shed light on the importance of empathic design and community-engaged design in their work. The role that students played in the memorials is woven throughout the discussions, offering educators a methodology for successfully employing projects of Reconciliation and Remembrance in the classroom. I recognize that this research is not exhaustive as there are hundreds of people who have been involved in the making of these two memorials, and there are many voices that contribute to each story. Instead of interviewing everyone, I chose to interview those educators and designers still working and connected with the Virginia universities with which the memorials are now a part, learning insight into the role that empathy and community played in their making.

The paper is composed of three parts: 1. Background information presenting a historical and cultural context specific to the Commonwealth of Virginia and which identifies the definitions of empathic design and community-based design used as a datum to measure outcomes, 2. Research obtained through personal interviews conducted with academicians involved in the design of the memorials, and 3. Conclusions reached from interviewing students involved in an academic project of reconciliation and remembrance.

Background: Historical and Cultural Context

With current debates about teaching history in the Commonwealth of Virginia, Virginians are witnessing the fact that historical narratives vary depending on one's biases or beliefs, but there is much to be uncovered if we take the opportunity to look deeper. Design is a powerful way to do that. At the end of the Civil War, Virginians, like many others residing in the South, were taught to believe in the Lost Cause narrative, which painted a picture of benevolent Southern slave owners and the Confederate heroes who quote-unquote “bravely defended their way of life” (American Battlefield Trust, 2020). This narrative was written into grade school history books and physically displayed in prominent monuments throughout Virginian cities and landscapes.



Figure 1: Picture of 'Confederate Monument'

(Retrieved from <https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/lost-cause-the/>)

A broader historical narrative of the colonization of the southern United States is now being told by historians such as Ric Murphy who in his book “The Arrival of the First Africans in Virginia,” aims to fully recognize African Americans and to “... ensure that their contributions and legacy no longer remain unknown in American History.” Similar historical narratives that acknowledge the role of institutional slavery have prompted discussions of Reconciliation and Remembrance within Virginia’s colleges and universities and their adjacent communities. Two preeminent public universities and their memorial projects of reconciliation and remembrance - the Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia, and the Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved at the College of William and Mary – serve as examples. Built on prominent locations on each campus (UVA’s memorial is built on the UNESCO Heritage Site part of campus; W&M’s memorial is built on the Historic Campus which is a Historic National Landmark), they boldly offer each University and their surrounding communities a place to reflect upon the history of slavery, and to remember the hundreds of enslaved African Americans who labored tirelessly to physically build each of these universities and to maintain the grounds as hallowed places of learning. Each memorial has resulted in two different designs: The Memorial for the Enslaved Laborers at UVA is a horizontal circular form in the landscape situated adjacent to the university’s famous open lawn and academic village. At the same time, William & Mary’s monument is a vertical structure that rises adjacent to the famous Wren building on what is known as the Historic Campus. One is made of stone while the other is composed of brick. One incorporates water as a symbolic element that evokes an idea of re-birth, while the other introduces the warmth of a central fire as a device to encourage remembrance by invoking ‘gathering’. As different as the two places are, they share numerous similarities, one of which is the importance of student involvement in the long and multifaceted process that preceded each design.



Figure 2: Photograph of the 'UVA Memorial to Enslaved Laborers'

(Retrieved from <https://news.virginia.edu/content/uvas-memorial-enslaved-laborerswins-top-design-award>)



Figure 3: Photograph of the 'W&M Hearth'

(Retrieved from <https://www.wm.edu/about/visiting/campusmap/location/hearth.php>)

Background: Empathic Design

Two pedagogical models that emerge as essential are Empathic Design and Community-Engaged Design. Both approaches understand the relationship between designer and user as critical to producing a memorial that is reflective of, and sensitive to, the users' desires and aspirations. Although Empathic Design can be viewed through a phenomenological lens deriving from an imaginative and sensorial understanding of space, as written about in *Empathic and Embodied Imagination: Intuiting Experience and Life in Architecture* by Juhani Pallasmaa (Pallasmaa, 2015), it is the practical techniques outlined by Leonard & Rayport in 1997, that offer substantive methods for building this relationship. Using these principles in a series of real projects, they argue for a qualitative approach to product design outlined by a series of 5 steps: Observation, Capturing Data, Reflection and Analysis, Brainstorming for Solutions, and Developing Prototypes for Possible Solutions (Leonard and Rayport, 1997), steps which will be referenced in the example projects presented. Originally conceived as a methodology for product design (the design of objects, or things), arguably it can be applied to the design of spaces as well, specifically the places of memorial and reflection.

Background: Community-Engaged Design

Engaging the community in the design process is promoted as a human-centered and ethical approach in practice as well as in academia. Written into the executive summary of their Engaging Community Guide (2019), the Washington American Institute of Architects states that "Architects have a responsibility for making a positive impact on society. Equitable and inclusive community engagement builds trust between designers and community members, sustains communities, undoes past damage, and helps create functional, affordable, safe spaces" (AIAW, 2019). As a teaching tool, Angotti et al. states that "the intersection of design practice and community engagement provides students with new opportunities to interact with people who will be users of the designs." Furthermore, he states, "Design education is founded in teaching students a process of critical thinking to execute a project addressing the needs of users. The initial challenge of addressing the needs of users is to understand 'the other'" (Angotti et al., 2011). It seems undeniable that projects of Reconciliation and Remembrance must at their core be engaged with the community they intend to reconcile with. In fact, the National Summit on Teaching Slavery developed an entire rubric (2018) for engaging with descendant communities so that museums and historic sites would create a "more honest and equitable version of history for future generations" (Montpelier Descendants Committee, 2018). Many methodologies for practicing Community-engaged design have been formulated. For the purposes of this paper, the approaches listed in the *AIA Washington Guide for Equitable Practice* are referenced: Engaging with Community Members as Partners; Understanding community Values; Promoting and prioritizing

equitable Outcomes; and Being an Active Community Member Outside of Work (AIAW, 2019).

Research: The Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers at the University of Virginia

Jane Fulton Suri in her chapter in *Empathic Design: Informed and Inspired by Other People's Experience*, states that making sense of other people's experience, which is often "divorced from our own," can be achieved if we "use our ability to learn about, and identify with, their experience" (Suri, 2003, p.52). Reconciliation and Remembrance projects pose an interesting dilemma for those who are not descendants of slaves. Kirt Von Daacke's own story reflects how his experience in understanding others is rooted in empathy. Von Daacke was the head researcher for the Memorial to the Enslaved Laborers at UVA. He has written extensively on slavery in Virginia and teaches courses on Slavery and the University. Wondering about Von Daacke's journey to UVA in Charlottesville I asked, "Did Virginia's controversial history, or current racial tensions draw you here?" "Not directly," he answered but instead told the story of one man – Reginald Butler (former UVA African American Studies Director) – who inspired his life's work. He was hooked when Reginald Butler delivered a lecture about slavery and how the past IS the present, and very real. Von Daacke stated that "the next three years were shaped by his mentorship" as he began a lifelong journey to understand that "the local and particular is a powerful window for a broader history of slavery" (Von Daacke, 2023).

Mattelmäki writes that, "Design empathy is not only information and facts but also inspiration and food for ideas. It requires a specific attitude and methods to support it. Design empathy calls for direct contact or connection between users and the designers – studying potential customers in their own context" (Mattelmäki, 2003, p119-120). Von Daacke's sensitivity is evident in the way he engaged community members throughout the design process as co-director of UVA President's Commission on Slavery and the President's Commission on the University in the Age of Segregation. When it comes to collecting community history and stories (or what one might see as 'data'), he stated that his primary role was one of "listening, and of 'creating space for conversation' allowing for the efforts and goals of each to be a 'shared' project with the community" (Von Daacke, 2023). Although not a direct correlation to Mattelmäki's techniques, Von Daacke's empathic approach created an environment where participants moved away from assumptions and instead worked toward inclusion and understanding.

Adjacent to Mattelmäki's approach, Leonard and Rayport write of the importance of sharing results during the 'Reflection and Analysis' step. This step in their empathic design approach calls for team members to "reflect on what they have observed and to review their visual data with other colleagues" (Leonard and Rayport, p. 112, 2003) which is evidenced in the work at UVA through Von Daack's sharing of results. He is a founding member of UVA's University Studying Slavery, a consortium of over 90 institutions focused on "sharing best practices and guiding principles as they engage in truth-telling educational projects focused on human bondage and the legacies of racism in their histories" (Scholar's Lab, 2013). I have since learned, through new projects such as the Roberson Project at Sewanee University (Sewanee, 2017), how the consortium has been an important tool for sharing knowledge and best practices, engaging in a collective effort to reconcile and remember.

Community-engaged design also played a significant role in the design of the UVA memorial, specifically in the efforts of Frank E. Dukes who seemed to have touched on all

aspects of its definition outlined in the AIA’s Guide for Equitable Practice. This mode of working was not only evident in the community work but in the classroom as well, directly linking students with the issues of reconciliation and remembrance. Lecturer and Co-Director of the Institute of Engagement and Negotiation at UVA, Dukes talked specifically about how intersections of students and community were a common thread throughout the design process (Dukes, 2023).

Frank Dukes told a story about the initial idea for a memorial that began with student outrage over a 2007 Board of Visitors installation of a plaque. This plaque was installed at the foot of the Rotunda as an “expression of regret” soon after the Virginia General Assembly passed its own statement reflecting regret for the state’s role in the slave trade (Wolfe, 2013). According to Dukes, students in his class *Writing Unwritable Wrongs* found the plaque to lack authenticity and prominence. After he asked his students to find the marker that acknowledged slavery at UVA, he reflected that “All of the students undoubtedly had walked right over it, or on it, without noticing it. Students were dismayed at the limits of this recognition, that it was underfoot, not only nearly hidden but trampled upon, that it barely mentioned the enslaved, and ignored their role in the nearly 40 years after UVA opened, and that it so directly centered Jefferson.” (Columbia GSAPP, 2020). The students in Dukes’ class were subsequently adamant about the need for what they thought was a more suitable memorial to honor the thousands of slaves at the university. It was this initial outrage over the 2007 plaque that sparked further momentum inspiring a new university and community organization – University and Community Action for Racial Equity (UCARE) – which aimed to study reconciliation and remembrance, and a robust student organization – Memorial to Enslaved Laborers (MEL) which sponsored the original design competition for a memorial in 2011.

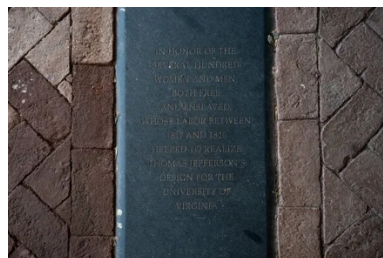


Figure 4: Personal photo of UVA Plaque

Parallel to Frank’s work as an educator, he played the role of community mediator, relying heavily on empathic design methodology. Leonard and Rayport’s description of the foundational step of *observation* in empathic design stresses that observation needs to be “conducted in the customer’s own environment” and should “employ multiple team members with different training – researchers, mediators and students” (Leonard and Rayport, p.103, 1997), Frank’s initial community outreach efforts involved both. He developed a multi-layered approach which included sending “community ambassadors” out into the surrounding neighborhoods. Many of these ambassadors were students who with a friendly and unassuming tone, were able to connect with those who were skeptical of the project. Insights into others’ viewpoints were made clear by this “reaching out” effort: for years many community members referred to the University of Virginia as “The Plantation” highlighting the invisible but very real divide between those of privilege and those without, or more bluntly understood as a reflection of superiority and inferiority (Dukes, 2023).

Frank was involved in teaching a course on “Race + Repair” which blended architectural history, planning, and US history. Taught in the community, and not on the University Grounds, this course was for both students and community members who through engagement in discussion became receptive to each other’s ideas. Through a constant commitment to equitable engagement, Frank and the design team were able to uncover truths within Charlottesville’s black communities giving insight into how the university was viewed. It became clear, after listening to Frank describe his work as a mediator and educator that empathic approaches in the classroom translated directly to community-engaged work, and that the community inspired empathic responses from his students; the two were inextricably linked.

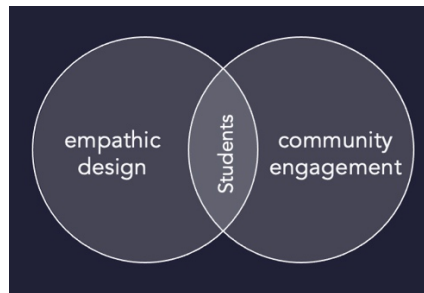


Figure 5: Diagram of Empathic Design and Community Engagement (personal research)

Another community-engaged example was told by Gregg Bleam, landscape architect for the memorial. As an award-winning designer, Gregg Bleam’s work, up until the UVA Memorial design, consisted of thoughtfully modernist landscape designs primarily for residential clientele. During his interview, he described working on the memorial as something completely different involving community meetings and working with the public as partners. In contrast to other project work, he would go into these meetings without any preconceived notions of what the design should be stating he had “no idea” and that it felt like it was “everyone’s project, yet no one’s project” at the same time (Bleam, 2023).

The final siting for the memorial design stands as a testament to a robust community-engaged approach. Gregg stated that numerous sites for the memorial were explored, including locating it on the famous lawn within Jefferson’s academic village; but the final location was based upon feedback from the members of the community who were afraid that the university might try to hide it. They desired the memorial to be “visible and accessible to the city of Charlottesville” (Bleam, 2023).

Research: Hearth: Memorial to the Enslaved at the College of William and Mary

Interviews with three educators reveal much about students being at the core of the empathic and community-engaged effort to unveil the hidden history of slavery at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Jody Allen, Assistant Professor of History, and the director of The Lemon Project, described the beginnings of their work. Although not widely known, students were the ones who initially called for a resolution to 1. study William & Mary’s history with slavery, 2. make that history public, and 3. establish a memorial. Allen explained that “There was one student who heard in passing, that William & Mary had been an enslaver, was surprised by that news, and wanted to learn more.” She brought her concern to friends, one of whom was the president of the NAACP student chapter at the time. Afterward, they approached the student assembly with the 3-part resolution, which was swiftly passed (Allen, 2023). The Board of Visitors then

established the Lemon Project: A Journey of Reconciliation, which aimed to “uncover much about the university’s enslaved men, women, and children, sharing findings through annual symposia, courses, special events, and other programming” (College of William and Mary, 2019).

Reflecting on the significance of student initiative at the beginning of the project, Susan Kerns, then Associate Professor and Director of the W&M Historic Campus, stated how important it was that Jody Allen continually reminded everyone throughout the process that it began with students, and the 2007 resolution they enacted. She stated in the interview, “I think **that** fact has given this a credibility, a deep credibility that would have been lost at certain administrative levels” (Kerns, 2023). Allen explained that keeping the memorial’s roots tied to students has had a positive effect on the current student body because it teaches them that they have the power to enact positive change. She reminds them “Students started this; you too can make a change on this campus” (Allen, 2023).

Like the process undertaken at UVA, the design for the final memorial – the Hearth – came after years of empathic and community-engaged research to uncover real stories about the enslaved people who worked at the university, their descendants, and the black community in Williamsburg. Referencing IDEO’s research team finding value in research conducted “in the customer’s own environment” (IDEO I, 2020), researchers at both UVA and W&M found immense insight by stepping outside of the university and into the neighborhoods. Much of the history about the enslaved is vague or undiscoverable. As in the case of one enslaved man named Lemon, whom the reconciliation project was named after, very little was uncovered besides his name, and as such, he represents “the known and the unknown enslaved people at William & Mary” according to Allen (Allen, 2023). Community meetings held in neighborhood churches and on front porches provided invaluable insight into the perceptions of many in the black community. Just as researchers at UVA learned of the university’s stigma (the lawn being understood as “the plantation”), researchers at W&M learned some hard lessons as well. Researchers at W&M discovered how members of the community understood the brick wall that surrounded the historic campus as symbolic of exclusion. Allen explained, “It said to them, YOU’RE NOT WELCOME.” Through oral history, she learned that as a black community member, the consensus was that “you couldn’t be here (on campus) unless you were pushing a broom” (Allen, 2023). Revelations like that were powerful reminders of the significance of using an empathic approach to their work.

Through my interview sessions, I learned how empathic and community-engaged design was central to the initial research but was also essential to the memorial’s formation. Years prior to the international call for a memorial design, Ed Pease, now Emeritus Senior Lecturer at William & Mary, began employing memorial design in his architectural design class. Ironically, the idea for a memorial design project came from one of his students. He explained that previously his annual Historic Campus tour on the first day of class was devoid of historical references until one of his students asked about something she had heard: “Didn’t there used to be an auction block here in these woods across the street?” Pease didn’t know the answer and still doesn’t but said that her innocent question raised awareness of the “casual cruelty” that existed in Williamsburg and the College of William and Mary when it came to the history of slavery (Pease, 2023). That same student asked that their final class project be a memorial. From that day forward, Pease employed an academic project prompting the students to design a memorial, located on the historic campus, which memorialized the enslaved at the College of William and Mary. His class developed into a community-based and multi-

discipline endeavor, in collaboration with Jody Allen and Susan Kerns. Inviting the community and administration to provide feedback, the class eventually became a model for the final design “ideas” competition for the Memorial project.

William and Mary’s “ideas” competition for the memorial references the empathic design techniques described in the article, 7 Simple rules for brainstorming. When in the “brainstorming stage”, managers at IDEO, an organization steeped in Empathic and Human-Centered Design ethos, tell their employees to heed 5 rules: defer judgment, build on the ideas of others, hold one conversation at a time, stay focused on the topic, and encourage wild ideas (IDEO U, 2020). W&M did all of this through the employment of an international design competition.

The competition itself was a way to “defer judgment, build on the ideas of others, and encourage wild ideas.” According to the competition proposal, the chosen concept will be a “physical memorial that establishes a new place of community and contemplation within or directly engaging with the setting of William & Mary's Historic Campus” (Zagursky, 2018). Not to be dismissed is the fact that the brief called for a new site on the hallowed ground of the Historic Campus, a National Historic Landmark. Prior to this decision, the students pushed back on the administration who initially thought the memorial could be a simple statue put “off in a corner”. Demonstrating the importance of this specific location through their academic research and design ideas, they insisted that it be located on the Historic Campus, in the actual location where the enslaved worked. The siting suggests that W&M engaged at that moment in a “loss of control”, or a “deferring of judgment”. Pease, in fact, described the entirety of the competition, and the uncertainty of its outcome, as a “hard pill to swallow” for the college’s leadership, and the surprise he felt when the administration ended up swallowing it [Pease, 2023]).

My interviewees, in telling the story, still marveled at the fact that it was finally there, on the historic campus, on a beautiful day this past summer. Families with young children bustled around us, and campus tour guides explained its relevance to future students, as we sat there talking. When asked about what they most appreciated about the project, each interviewee turned to the other and stated, “Working with you”. I suspect that their shared purpose, their humility, and their friendship bound them together, in empathy and community.



Figure 6: Personal Photo Susan Kerns, Jody Allen, Ed Pease

Conclusions

Parallel to my research, ‘Place of Jubilation for the Weyanoke’ is a sophomore studio project that provided an opportunity to test how projects of reconciliation and remembrance can foster empathic and community-engaged design learning (The Weyanoke are a group of people in Eastern Virginia who share “Red-Black” history and culture, and a desire to restore "that which has been dispersed and shattered within us.") Stages of the project included: Interpretive Mapping, Reflections on the influence of People and Place, A Study of Light and form, Sensorial Site Analysis, Client Storytelling, and final Design.

To introduce our students to the idea of reconciliation and remembrance, my colleague Tim Hamnett and I, asked them to design an interpretive map based on their understanding of the Hearth project at William & Mary - interpretations were based on individual research & visits to the sites. One student - Nour Mahmoud – emphasized the importance of the unknown laborers by carving the words in her map. She spent time at the memorial, stating that being on-site influenced her decisions: “When I was sitting at the hearth, it was creating a harsh shadow reminding me that the memorial was built for people we do not know” (Mahmoud, 2023).



Figure 7: Personal Photo Nour Mahmoud model

The project continued with self-reflection. As a precursor to dialogue with members of the Weyanoke, and a way to help students empathize with one another, this stage required that each student contemplate their own life story and present it to the class as a kind of “show and tell”: three slides representing PEOPLE, 3 representing PLACE, and 1 concluding HAIKU. Afterward, many students reported a deeper sense of connection with their classmates and a new sense of inclusion.

Tectonic approaches to making walls and ceiling planes were then studied to understand patterns and forms using natural light. Students were asked to study the histories of both ‘red’ and ‘black’ cultures for insight into incorporating symbolism in their designs. Symbolism resonated deeply with the students because of the connection to aspects of Weyanoke culture and heritage. Andrew Grider, for instance, stated that his space was inspired by the ritual W. African dance of “heart to ground, heart to drummer, and heart to sky”, and considered those aspects in his final design (Grider, 2023).

Focusing on sensorial analysis added an emotional layer to analytical site analysis, touching on aspects that were central to the ethos of the Wyanoke such as light, materiality, and landscape. It is also tied to their diasporic heritage. The site for this project was our own building’s ground-floor courtyard on the campus of VCU. It represented what Weyanoke

called the perfect place for a community of people who make **wherever** they are their sacred home. The significance of this place was brought to light when one student – Zahra Jalajel - found resonance stating, “I know VCU was built on tribal land, and at the end of the day, this land was theirs” (Zahra, 2023).

Storytelling played an essential empathic role in the process. Members of the Weyanoke graciously answered our myriad of questions and provided foundational insight into their work to find intersections in their cultural heritage. Zahra recalled, “I identify with these people. I am removed from my great-grandmother – and it was almost as if I was able to hear her perspective” (Zahra, 2023).



Figure 8: Personal photo Anita Harrell and VCU students

The final design – a Weyanoke Place of Jubilation – offered an outdoor gathering space for performances, lectures, and other cultural events on the ground floor of the Pollak building on the campus of VCU. It was presented to reviewers with confidence and grace, and celebrated with joy at a Weyanoke Association potluck lunch where we shared dreams of building it someday. This lunch with the Weyanoke, intended as a fun celebration, also exemplified empathic and community-engaged design in our desire for engagement and a shared experience.



Figure 9: Personal photo Weyanoke and VCU students

Student interviews were given at the end of the project to gauge the success of these project phases as well as the overall results of the project. Although not exhaustive, student comments confirmed positive engagement with specific aspects of empathic and community-engaged design, and that overall, the project provided the students with a sense of purpose. One student Christian Galindo Torres stated that this type of project, “reminded me to remain humble and solemn as I designed. It’s very easy to get caught up in becoming a star designer – this project was a reminder that the client comes first” (Torres, 2023).

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