

Roundabouts, memorials, and the intangibility of processes

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I was traveling in Ireland for a while over the summer – a beautiful country with weather that changes every 10 minutes. And I was struck by something that (almost) stopped me in my tracks. In fact it's just as well it didn't as I was driving round a roundabout at the time.

I'm sure you are familiar with the phenomenon...as you are driving along you see something – or read something – and it takes a few seconds to sink in...by which time you are well passed it and just think to yourself..."did I really see that?"..."did it really say that?" In this instance, the surprise came about because of a big formal plaque that was mounted on the roundabout and that declared boldly "The Seamus O'Halloran roundabout". I may have the spelling of the name wrong – but that was definitely the message.

Over the next few miles I could not stop myself wondering about this sign – and about what it signified. Was Seamus a big wheel – sadly departed – and now memorialised for ever in a roundabout? Perhaps he was responsible for the road layout in the town and this was thought by his colleagues to be an appropriate mark of respect. I was struggling to work out my own position on this...would I be gratified to be remembered in this way?

That line of speculation led me to the more mundane and far less interesting notion that it was probably an advertisement. Perhaps Seamus ran a business near the roundabout and wanted to 'catch' the passing motorist. On my return home I followed up this possibility with my local council, who have (I was surprised to discover) a Naming and Numbering Authority within their civic engineering section. And it turns out that it is possible (and indeed not so unusual) to *sponsor* a roundabout. A florist or a garden centre e.g. might take responsibility for planting and presenting it – and of course they could then erect a sign on it to tell us all that this was the 'grow-well garden centre' roundabout. Incidentally, the Naming and Numbering Authority assured me that they had never been asked to consider naming a roundabout as a memorial. But the enthusiastic chap I spoke too was quite taken by the idea and urged me to send them a proposal!

I spent a while ruminating on what other kinds of business might have an interest in advertising their wares on a roundabout? Opticians...perhaps with a combination of sharp and slightly blurry signs. And lawyers – of course – to catch the local pile-ups. And that in turn led me to wonder what *other* kinds of object might be the focus of such advertising? We are familiar (at least in London) with the big red London bus completely (top to bottom) swathed in an advertising image and I have seen whole

buildings in New York similarly swathed. They are certainly impressive – and make a huge statement – but they are only using their respective objects as passive carriers of the image. They are in effect just huge (and sometimes mobile) advertising hoardings. By contrast, what struck me as interesting about the roundabout was the possibility (just a possibility) that there was some connectivity between the object and the message – as the florally rich roundabout is linked to the florist. What about *traffic lights* as a medium for celebrating and advertising a control systems company? 'This red light is brought to you by...sync-omatic...all your systems control needs catered for'.

But there is a problem here. I always thought that the idea of advertising was to associate the name of the advertising company with some good feeling on the part of the recipient of the advertising message. If the casual passer-by feels good about the product/experience – they might feel well-disposed to the company. But the chances of me feeling good about roundabouts or traffic lights are – putting it at its highest – slim. Rather, I am likely to associate them with delay, frustration, irritation, and a state of mind closely akin to road-rage.

The Seamus O'Halloran roundabout seemed to me completely unremarkable except for the fact of its very formal naming. And that encouraged me to see it more in terms of the other side of the story – the memorialising bit. For we do undeniably memorialise people and events through objects – and not infrequently through architecture. Just in Goldsmiths we have the George Wood theatre, the Ben Pimlott building and several more examples. On my theme of the 'fit' between object and person, Nelson's Trafalgar Square column seems to me not to work. It just stands there as a great big thing – but says nothing (to me) about the man. By contrast, a visit to HMS Victory in Portsmouth gives a far more real sense of Nelson's life and achievement. The life is memorialised in the object. Even though he didn't build it – or design it – his greatness is inevitably associated with it. Similarly I would have thought for Caxton and his printing press; Stradivari and his violins; Galileo and his telescopes; Quant and her mini-skirts.

But there is a further difficulty about this, for the real contribution of e.g. Caxton was not that he produced a press – but that he was the first person to bring to England the idea of a printing press with moveable type-faces. It was this *process* that he brought rather than an object. But it is the object that remains forever his memorial. Similarly I suspect in many cases the objects that we associate with people are in effect a shorthand reminder of a life spent struggling with a set of ideas and

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processes. Oppenheimer was a physicist struggling with new materials and processes – but he will always be remembered for the bomb.

We can turn this notion on its head and consider what objects tell us about people. When I'm watching Time-Team or some other archaeological programme it always strikes me that the artefacts – while interesting in themselves – are merely the surface manifestation of ideas that were important in the culture being explored. Why did they make that? Why did they make it like that? Getting behind the objects, to understand what was going on in the heads of their creators, always seems to me the most interesting challenge. In this context, Gill Hope's work with what she terms cognitive archaeology, reported at this year's D&T Association research conference, is fascinating stuff. It links to what is called 'processual archeology' in which archaeology and anthropology merge and become indistinguishable. More like looking in on a culture in dynamic action – than peering into a glass box of 'dead' objects in a museum.

The problem of course with dynamic processes is that they are intangible. They are about **change** from one state to another – not about the states themselves. So it's really hard to talk about the greatness of e.g. Chinese cultural evolution without using the specifics of Xia, Shang, Xin, Tang or Ming which provide the milestones that document and make manifest the journey. It's so much easier to remember (and be remembered for) the objects that arise through the exercise of those processes; the clock, map, bomb, wheel, or windmill. Whatever we might believe about the power of the designing experience, its no surprise that parents are so attached to the eventual object. The triumphs and disasters that have been met and dealt with along the way in the details of the design are just not apparent to those outside the experience.

But whilst *objects* have a more immediate resonance for the lay-person, I suspect that those with some specialist knowledge of the matter in hand will be far more provoked by speculating on the *processes* that they encapsulate. I am not a musician, and for me Sergeant Pepper or the White Album (to pick a couple of musical artefacts) present a fitting memorial to the Beatles creative genius. But those whose life and work takes them into the inner processes of creative expression through music will – I suspect – not be satisfied by this. They will want more than the objects.

Whilst artefacts speak (at least to some extent) for themselves, the tough reality is that processes only make sense to those that can do them, and who can (at least to

some extent) use the object to get inside the mind of the creator.

I would like to think that Seamus did indeed design the road layout in that town in Ireland, and moreover that that particular roundabout – because of its subtle complexities of camber and sight-line – represented the pinnacle of his achievement. But only his professional colleagues would appreciate these subtleties.

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