



Built on Bones

Colonialism is already part of a city near you.

There was a time when I, like many archaeologists, thought bones were
hidden beneath the surface,
waiting to be discovered. For fingers, fumbling with excitement,
to unearth them from the past.

But really our cities, like our collections, are built on bones.

Built of bones.

Our histories are both human, and inhumane.

The legacies of conquest, of trauma are captivating, but hauntingly so.

MACRO

Built on Bones is a seed of an idea for an Augmented Reality app that layers contemporary cities, our everyday landscapes, with skeletal landmarks of colonialism. It challenges those of us who are privileged enough to escape the everyday landscapes to face our heritage, to not just remember but to reconcile and even decolonize the past. Epidemics, famine, persecution, abuse, murder, and residential schools have all created the allegorical cemeteries we inhabit today.

Geo-located data situates users within a network of skeletal cities. Ruins dotted across the landscape.

And it refocuses the gaze of all-to-distant metropolises that profited from this exploitation, this ruination, but all too often remain oblivious to the bones through which they walk.

Approach

Built on Bones was designed to layer hand-illustrated bones (to avoid unethical use of photographs or digitization of human bones), blurring the impressionistic with the realistic to contrast the physical world with the colonial structures. It has a handcrafted quality, to bring a sense of humanity to the digital world.

It is based in AR (using Aurasma as a test, but in long term to be built open source) and Carto mapping tiles (navigability) for accessibility and connection to contemporary movements through urban spaces. It is intended to be used in transit whether in our everyday movements or even short-term visits to a place, so the app is designed for mobility (i.e. mobile technology), geo-location and mapping to help guide you and notify you of skeletal structures nearby.

MICRO

Emphasizing the 'rapid' in rapid development project, this was a short, intense stint of creative imaginings and making but does not exist as a fully packaged, functional app.

Following a research phase exploring the colonial sites of my current city, Victoria, British Columbia (Canada), I selected three sites to consider the range of colonial imprints on the landscape.

British Columbia's Parliament Buildings was the first test design site. Located on the (unceded) traditional territories of the Lekwungen people, the seat of government, and also the site of the beginnings of the provincial museum, Parliament is a symbol of colonial power and heritage.

Next, Craigdarroch Castle epitomizes British wealth and success in Victoria - the ostentatious home of the Dunsmuir family, hailing from Scotland, and making their fortunes through coal mining and the railroad industry, which was made possible by Chinese labour, defined by exploitation, segregation and inequity. It is also built on unceded territory. The skeletal frame distinctly grafts onto the many, many chimneys that seem to symbolize the extravagance of this building. Today, Craigdarroch Castle is a house museum that allows thousands and thousands of visitors each year to step back in the Dunsmuir lifestyle - but how do we address the structures that made that lifestyle possible?

Finally, to bring it close to the home of the Heritage Jam 2017, the Leeds City Museum was similarly skeletalized. During my time living in the UK, I rarely saw the legacies of colonialism in North America addressed beyond considerations of slavery, particularly in the Caribbean. Occasionally, I was referred to as 'from the colonies' but I often wanted to deconstruct the boundary that the Atlantic Ocean so rigidly provides to separate Europeans from the landscapes they plundered and the heritage of so many people that was not viewed as valuable beyond what was 'collectible' (with clear implications for museums, heritage and archaeological collections).

After creating pen and ink drawings of bones to overlay Parliament, I used Photoshop to incorporate with Creative Commons licensed images (Attribution/Non-Commercial).ⁱ Aurasma and Carto were used to craft visualisations of how the AR app would work. I used slideshow software to build basic animations and record a video - which I saw as the best means for demonstrating the functionality of this interactive app that blends global landscapes.

The aim of the resource is not to present a particular interpretation of colonial history but point to identified sites that have been built on unceded territory, traditional territories or through the profits and power of colonial empires and inequities, including the exploitation of indigenous and/or enslaved peoples. Heritage websites associated with each siteⁱⁱ were utilized to collect histories of the site and it is also envisioned that this type of layering could be crowdsourced so that artist, researchers

and community members could attach skeletal elements and stories to give this app a sense of multi-vocality.

CREATOR

Dr. Katherine Cook is an archaeologist and historian, focused on digital public archaeology and colonial/post-colonial heritage in the Atlantic. She has pursued research and partnerships with museums in Canada, the Caribbean, and the UK and is currently based in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria (on the traditional territory of the WS'ANEC', Lkwungen, and Wyomilth peoples), where she is a settler/visitor. She is interested in ways in which digital technology can be used to change perspectives on the past to build empathy, community and connection in the present.

She appreciates and acknowledges assistance in editing imaging files by Chrissy Taylor, and all that she has learned about decolonization of heritage from her colleagues, students, and museum partnerships in BC.

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PROJECT VIDEO FILE: <https://youtu.be/Cw9oEsiwZD0>

ⁱ Images utilized: <http://www.pngpix.com/download/girl-hand-holding-white-tablet-png-image>,
<http://www.digitaljournal.com/image/113684>,
https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/70/Craigdarroch_Castle_May_2011.jpg,
<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6b/Leeds-city-museum.jpg>

ⁱⁱ Websites include: <https://www.leg.bc.ca/learn-about-us/visiting-the-legislature>, <https://thecastle.ca>,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leeds_City_Museum.