Conflict and Context: A Response to Recent Digital Archaeological Initiatives for At-Risk Cultural Heritage

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Abstract

In this article we discuss a selection of organisations and initiatives that have proposed initiatives in response to the post-conflict reconstruction of built heritage in the Middle East, especially Syria and Iraq. We evaluate the public-facing elements of these projects and advocate for a greater focus upon true Open Access, contextualization, and the ethics and responsibilities of their actions with respect to the needs and voices of the full range of stakeholders.

Introduction

Since the rise of Da’esh (so-called Islamic State) and its programmatic destruction and looting of cultural heritage in Syria, Iraq, and beyond, responses to at-risk and recently destroyed monuments in conflict zones have turned primarily to the digital. Numerous initiatives, both commercial and non-profit, are now making use of vast technological resources to respond to the erasure of a rich archaeological record. In the absence of a measured, contextual approach, however, these initiatives are vulnerable to accusations of technological solutionism, the belief that technology, in and of itself, can benignly and efficiently solve problems and produce a better world (see Morozov 2013; Huggett 2004).

This, of course, is not the first time that such reconstructions of cultural heritage have been discussed (see Foster & Curtis 2016 for an overview), including in post-conflict contexts (see e.g., Walasek 2016 and Viejo-Rose 2011). What is different in the responses to the destruction in Syria and Iraq is the speed at which they have been developed and presented as the conflict remains ongoing. In the context of these rapid responses, the assumption that modern
technologies will 'save the day' has underlied the language used to engage the public. This rhetoric is easily perpetuated in social and news media and, by maintaining focus on the technology itself, implies that the ethical and social issues that have surrounded other reconstruction attempts are not of primary concern here.

In this paper we present three of the numerous current digital archaeology projects that aim to create physical reconstructions of cultural heritage in Syria and Iraq; these three represent a range of approaches and have received international media attention. The purpose of this critique is not to advise against technological engagement or reconstruction initiatives, but rather to advocate for more measured, comprehensive approaches that take into account not only the complexities of archaeological and heritage contexts, but also the multiplicity of stakeholding communities. While much of the hype surrounding these projects has subsided, it is important to keep the pressure up for ethical, responsible solutions during this crucial moment in high-level decision making and the allocation of funds for post-conflict reconstruction.

We start with a brief overview of our position on ethical, digital public archaeology, present a summary of the selected reconstruction projects, and then evaluate them from two main angles: presentation and education; and co-production and Open Access. In this way, we consider the ethics, responsibilities and communities that these projects should include. (We do not present a critique here of the physical outputs, see e.g., Factum Foundation 2016.)

**Practising ethical digital public archaeology**

Due to the rapid nature of development in the digital sphere, professional archaeological bodies have not kept pace with the necessary provision of related ethical guidelines and statements (see Richardson 2018 for a full discussion). This means that there is no easy way, currently, for the archeological community to hold digital public archaeology projects accountable. However, we (the authors) suggest that there are certain basic tenets that should be considered in project planning and implementation.

In the context of post-conflict cultural heritage, creating a digital object should not be a goal in and of itself; like all archaeological work, the context
matters as much as the artefacts. To remain ethically grounded, all projects, which can have numerous potential aims and stakeholders, need to identify why they are doing this work and for whom. As Munawar (2017) argues, the stakeholders who often have least voice and, arguably, most to lose are the local people (by ‘local’ we mean both those still resident in the affected country and those displaced and living as diaspora communities elsewhere). High on the list of aims should be using the project to help the affected communities by raising the profile of what has happened to them and, crucially, by trying to find ways for those communities, often heavily disenfranchised, to regain control over their heritage.

There are numerous ways in which this can be achieved. Raising the profile should be a win-win situation with little overhead cost, using basic and well-established informing and educating techniques (see McManus 2000), such as didactic plaques alongside installations explaining the nature of the reconstructions, the original monuments and the contemporary context of conflict and destruction. Open Access can also play a role in increasing inclusivity by making it possible for a wider group of people to be involved, particularly where there are practical challenges to in-person participation. We recognize that Open Access does not come without negative side-effects (see Cook 2019: 10-11), but we maintain that openness and collaboration are powerful ways to break down structural inequalities within hierarchies of power that are associated with cultural heritage. With that in mind, we have seen that co-production, where possible, presents an incredibly effective way for local communities to regain control. Such work is difficult and delicate (Cook 2019: 6); it takes time and effort to build collaborative relationships, so projects need to incorporate this into their planning. If done well, digital public archaeology projects—like the actual archaeological and heritage sites—have the power to enchant and engage, to “stand as seedbeds for human generosity, ethical mindfulness, and care for the world at large” (Perry 2019: 1).

**Current Reconstruction Projects and Initiatives**

*The Institute for Digital Archaeology (IDA)*
The IDA was created in 2012 and claims to be “at the forefront of the development and use of digital imaging, 3D printing and robotic carving techniques for the cataloguing, conservation and reconstruction of treasured heritage materials” (IDA 2017). We focus here on their replica of an arch from Palmyra, Syria. In 2016, the IDA produced a 1/3-scale reproduction of this second-century AD monumental Roman arch—the central element of a tripartite limestone arch that spanned a road at Palmyra—that was destroyed by Da’esh in 2015. Using photogrammetry, they created a 3D digital model, which was subsequently carved from Egyptian marble using robotic technology from the Italian firm TorArt. The first public presentation of the replica arch was in London in Trafalgar Square, 19–21 April 2016. The replica arch has since gone on tour, appearing in New York (19–21 April 2016), Dubai (12–14 February 2017), Florence (30 March–late April 2017), Arona, Italy (29 April–late September 2017), Washington, D.C. (26–30 September 2018) and Geneva (12–26 April 2019). Additionally, another, smaller replica using the same digital file as this arch was put on permanent display in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London, in November 2018.

Association Incontro di Civiltà and International Centre for the Study of the Preservation and Restoration of Cultural Property (ICCROM)
In 2016 (7 October–11 December), the Association Incontro di Civiltà and ICCROM hosted an exhibition in the Colosseum, Rome: “Rising from the Ashes: Ebla-Nimrud-Palmyra”. Curated by Francesco Rutelli and Paolo Matthiae, the exhibition included 1:1 chalk-powder 3D prints of now-destroyed heritage: a human-headed winged bull (lamassu) from Nimrud, Iraq; the ceiling of the Temple of Bel and two busts from Palmyra, Syria; and the State Archives from Ebla, Syria. ICCROM states that these reconstructions were designed to bring the destroyed objects “back to life through state-of-the-art technology” (ICCROM 2016). The replica lamassu was displayed again in November 2017 outside the UNESCO headquarters in Paris, France.

#NewPalmyra
Founded by Bassel Khartabil, a Palestinian-Syrian open-source software developer and digital activist who was arrested by Da’esh in Syria in 2012, #NewPalmyra is a fully Open Access, Creative Commons-affiliated initiative for creating a virtual reconstruction of Palmyra and its monuments to reside in the public domain (#NewPalmyra n.d.). A virtual reconstruction of the arch from Palmyra is one of several models in process, and a two-meter high, 3D-printed replica of the tetrapylon of Palmyra (also destroyed by Da’esh) was unveiled in April 2017 at the Creative Commons Summit in Toronto (see Bill 2017; Braga 2017). The project has also participated in numerous other events and exhibitions.

**Presentation, Accessibility and Education**

These three initiatives have hosted public events related to their reconstruction projects in Europe, North America, and the Gulf. Notably, these are not in the affected countries; there are plausible security reasons why this might not have been the case, though some events are now taking place in Iraq, e.g. the “Return to Mosul” exhibition in January 2019. Both the Association Incontro di Civiltà/ICCROM and #NewPalmyra exhibitions provided didactic panels about their reconstructions. Unfortunately, no such information seems to have been present at the former’s 2017 installation of the replica lamassu outside UNESCO headquarters in Paris, though the Twitter account @Unite4Heritage posted a short video that provided some narrative and context for the replica (6 November 2017). The IDA’s public presentation of its replica arch, which has been the most extensive among the projects and has received the most media attention, however, has rightly been criticised for the lack of such basic information provision. Although there has been a slow improvement of information provided at subsequent public displays of the IDA’s arch, it cannot and should not be held up as a paragon of effective public engagement (contra MPLS 2017).

The most problematic installation of the replica arch was in Trafalgar Square, where there was no written information for visitors, other than banners promoting the IDA and their sponsors. There were no didactic plaques or information boards to provide context about the site of Palmyra, or even to
explain the purpose of the event (Figure 1). This was noted at the time, not only by professional archaeologists such as Dr Gabe Moshenska (on Twitter; @GabeMoshenska, 19 April 2016), but also by visitors (Kamash 2017: 616). Compounding this problem was the fact that staff from the IDA were conspicuous in their absence once it was open to the public. Although a lot of attention was paid to journalists, politicians and other invited high-profile figures, regular visitors including several Syrian and Iraqi people who came just to see the arch, were not explicitly catered for (Kamash 2017: 617, in particular postcard 0002/61699). The focus here was very much on the digitally-created object and not on the cultural context and people involved. This does not demonstrate a commitment to meaningful public engagement. The replica itself continued to be the focus in New York (Voon 2016) and Dubai, where the arch stood once again without any contextual information (Figure 2). In Florence and Arona a didactic plaque was finally included next to the replica arch, giving some contextual information about the original, its destruction, and the current project.

The problem across all of these IDA events is that without framing this endeavour in a way that explicitly defines its archaeological and contextual scope, the media and the public are left to guess the manifold meanings behind such activities, making it easy for misinformation and problematic rhetoric to define the conversation about cultural heritage. The most extreme examples of such misinformation come from the persistent stories from fringe groups on the internet, associating the arch with pagan devil worship (see e.g., Warren 2018), which is partly due to confusion over which part of the site has been reconstructed (see Kamash 2017: 615).

The lack of on-site contextual information at the IDA events was, to some extent, ameliorated by companion websites; a general web link was provided on the IDA banners at these events (City Hall 2016; Arch in Dubai 2017), and a QR code was added to the plaques in Italy. The Incontro di Civiltà website (2017) provides some information for those who were not able to visit their exhibition, but lacks solid, contextual information, posting mostly video news clips. The #NewPalmyra website (n.d.) provides more information than the other projects, such as architectural details of the originals and basic historic context. It is worth
noting, however, that none of these project websites provides information in Arabic (other than the “about” page of #NewPalmyra), a major limiting factor for access across all of these projects, for which Syrians and Iraqis should be one of the key audiences.

Co-production and Open Access

The reception of these models, in particular the IDA’s arch, suggests that it remains unclear—beyond the goal to create digital reconstructions of destroyed or at-risk cultural heritage—why the models are being created, and for whom (see also Manawar 2017). In response to the London installation, Prof. Eleanor Robson (UCL) dubbed it the ‘toy arch’ on Twitter and pointed to the expense that could have been used more productively in alternative ways (@Eleanor_Robson 19 April 2016). In the same thread, Heba Abd el Gawad (Durham University) observed that, in her opinion, the local communities of the Middle East were invisible in the decision-making processes for such events (and over what should happen long-term). While Dr Ma’amoun Abdulkarim (then Director of the Syrian Department of Antiquities (DGAM)) was often included in conversations and events, his is just one voice and certainly not representative of the entire Syrian community. Syrian refugees, for example, when asked about the replica arch are described as being “bemused” (Trentin 2018: 7). Contrary to their stated intents, their public events and web presences indicate that the IDA and Incontro di Civiltà/ICCROM are prioritizing technological solutions over engagement with and support of the people of Syria and Iraq. #NewPalmyra, on the other hand, places greater emphasis on the central audience for their initiatives and the mutual benefit of involving stakeholding communities.

The key difference here revolves around co-production, which we argue should lie at the heart of ethical reconstruction projects that go beyond the technology. A central consideration for any reconstruction project, where living people and ancient objects are so intimately linked, must be the inclusion of, and sharing control with, those most deeply affected; in this case, those currently living in, or displaced from, Syria and Iraq.

The language employed by these initiatives on their websites and in the media points toward ideas of Open Access and shared cultural heritage through
data, images, and crowdsourcing. As discussed above, each of the projects has an online presence that gives some contextual information and, in selected cases, access to models or images. In fact, it is only #NewPalmyra that is truly Open-Access, allowing unrestricted access and unrestricted reuse. There are currently eight freely downloadable architectural models available via a CC0 license (#NewPalmyra n.d.). Context and status of the original, technical data for the model, and sources for all information are provided and easy to find on each model’s page, where visitors are encouraged to download the models and to contribute to completing them or, explicitly, to engage in new, creative outputs via GitHub.

Creativity is a significant element of the #NewPalmyra project. The project includes artists from the Middle East as advisors and, as well as events that showcase the 3D prints, has run events with interactive, inclusive art installations. At Fossasia Singapore (18-20 March 2016), for example, a version of the arch from Palmyra was printed out on tiles and coloured in by conference participants to “bring an element of personal creativity to preserving cultural heritage” (#NewPalmyra n.d.). We conclude that using digital technologies to enhance a sense of individual creativity in the wider process is a positive path to follow, encouraging a deep, personal level of engagement among a broader audience (see also Perry 2019).

**Conclusions**

It is clear that there are many basic issues and problems that have not yet been addressed around post-conflict reconstruction, especially by the IDA and Incontro di Civiltà. Of course there are numerous additional issues that we have not been able to cover here, such as the language and rhetoric used to describe or in response to these projects, or even whether reconstruction is the best (and only) solution. While these projects use the language of Open Access, only #NewPalmyra truly espouses its principles. Furthermore, there is a desperate need for more contextualization. UNESCO’s public support for the IDA and Incontro di Civiltà suggests that the impact of these issues has not been fully acknowledged or investigated by major cultural heritage initiatives.
We, the authors, therefore, issue this as a call to the archaeological community. We ask our community to stand up and speak out, not only on social media, but also through our professional organisations. We, the archaeological community, must take responsibility to lobby our professional bodies for “clear and robust ethical statements” (Richardson 2018: 70) and need to do so without delay, so that we can hold current and future projects accountable. In addition, and crucially, we ask our community to proactively collaborate with the wider publics that are interested in, and should have ownership over, what might happen next. There is a pressing need to make sure that any project uses the highest standards of education and inclusion that might better serve the communities of Syria and Iraq when they rebuild their lives.

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References


**Figure captions**
Figure 1: Inside the IDA marquee at the Trafalgar Square event. Note the banners advertising the IDA and its partners, but the lack of further information. Photo: Zena Kamash.

Figure 2: The installation of the replica arch in New York. Note the banner advertising the IDA and its partners, the QR code, but the lack of further information. Photo: Senta German. Reproduced with the permission of the photographer.