

# Immortalised: A reminder of why we remember

**Historic England's year-long *Immortalised* project explored the various – often contentious – ways that memory is etched into the built environment, and asked designers: are there new approaches to engaging with the past?**

Austrian writer Robert Musil once argued that there is nothing so invisible as a monument. In recent years this idea has been tested across the world, from Charlottesville to Johannesburg, Budapest to Bristol. The raw emotions on show when people gather to protest or tear down a statue can seem at odds with their inert materiality. This is because memorials – far from being invisible – are prone to become lightning rods for wider debates over injustice and representation. It is in such moments that we realise memorials themselves do not remember. Instead they are part of a constant dialogue, one that encompasses artists and architects, the wider built environment, those in power, and the people who pass by them every day.

Why would Historic England, the statutory body responsible for celebrating and caring for England's historic environment, want to tackle such a contentious and unwieldy subject? At one level the *Immortalised* project – a year-long season of events exploring the different ways memory is etched into the historic landscape – had a simple aim: to encourage people to look again at the memorials around them and think about the stories they hold. This might mean asking members of the public to share information about lesser known acts of commemoration, like the memorial commissioned by a woman in Witney at the end of the First World War to celebrate peace, and the safe return of those who survived, including her two sons.

But asking people to reconsider the memorial landscape can also reveal complex histories and spark difficult conversations. What are we to make for example of the prominent statue to Edward Colston in Bristol? Should this patron of the city continue to stand on a plinth, without response or reinterpretation, despite his deep ties to the transatlantic slave trade? Monuments and memorials reflect the values and hopes of their time, but this picture is only ever partial,



above *Immortalised* exhibition display at The Workshop in Vauxhall, London © Historic England

and usually shaped by the rich and the powerful. Questioning such histories means confronting past inequalities, many of which continue to resonate into the present.

Rather than shy away from such topics, *Immortalised* sought to provide a forum for re-examining the delightful and difficult monuments we are left with, and the memories our generation might want to leave to the future. The project culminated in an exhibition exploring these issues from a

number of perspectives, highlighting current grassroots memorial practices aiming to surface hidden histories, as well as prominent campaigns to remove contested monuments, such as that to Colston. The sheer variety of projects, groups and stories brought to light in the exhibition testifies to a vibrant memory culture, extending far beyond statues in public squares. For every general on a plinth there are hundreds of park benches commemorating 'Betty's Favourite Spot'.

When crowds do gather to demand changes to the memorial landscape, it is rarely the architectural qualities of the monument that are called into question. And yet design still matters in these debates. Rethinking the form that memorials might take can help to encourage new ways of engaging with the past, promoting discussion over reverence, diversity over authority.

To help explore these possibilities, *Immortalised* looked to the (potential) future of the memorial landscape through a nationwide design competition. More than 70 submissions were received, from which ten were invited to develop their proposals for display in the exhibition. The responses included abstract sculptural works, such as Jim Bond's proposal for a memorial to scientist Rosalind Franklin, and Kyle Ian Dawney's star-studded plaque to Helen Sharman, the first Briton in space. Other suggestions were more ephemeral, such as 'The Long Line' by Katrina Porteous and Peter Zinovieff, which imagined a poetic sound installation commemorating the men, women and children of a small Northumberland fishing community.

Not all proposals were so celebratory, however. Konyalala Ndlovu's monumental architectural statement 'The Discarded Children' directly confronted one of the darkest narratives of British colonial history: the deportation of an estimated 100,000 children to various corners of the Empire. Looking closer to home, 'We Will Be Dead Things' by Abondance Matanda imagined a sculptural installation showing young black women who had been the victims of gang violence, subverting the usual expectations of who can and should be 'immortalised'. Finally, the politics of remembrance were brought front and centre in 'Contextualising Colston' by MSMR Architects and 'A Long Shadow Over London' by Studio MASH, both of which looked to transform the meaning of extant memorials through new additions to the streetscape.

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above Design proposal for 'A Long Shadow Over London' by Studio Mash

For Max Martin of Studio MASH, the design competition offered an exciting opportunity to experiment with the familiar architectural language of monuments and memorials: 'Young designers should play a part in the reassessment of memorials; they can offer

## EXHIBITION

new approaches that challenge established architectural solutions'. Long Shadow met this brief by subverting the one-sided story of individual achievement common with statues. Here the 'shadow' cast by General Robert Clive's monument in London is rendered in dark slate, engraved with a dense tapestry of drawings and text, expressing conflicting narratives about this contentious historical figure. As Martin suggests, however, the voices and stories included in such reinterpretations need to be considered carefully: 'Do you present "just the facts" of Clive's life, or do you address the inherent bias of the existing memorial by speaking out against it? Attitudes are bound to change again in the future – memorials struggle to reflect these shifting messages and agendas'.

Monuments and memorials are never invisible, only more or less intelligible. *Immortalised* is a reminder that memory matters, and the forms it takes are myriad and merit pause for thought. To draw out these complexities means engaging in an ongoing conversation across history, design, architecture and politics. This work is perpetual, and it must remain so, because if memory is anything it is always in flux.

■ Colin Sterling, University College London, and Tamsin Silvey, Historic England



above People strolling past a statue of Edward Colston in late 19th Century Bristol © Historic England Archive