My Google Death
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It is a truth facing those of the digital age.
I open my email and a LinkedIn connection proposal from a former colleague pops up. This happens all the time, but this invite is quite special. This person died last winter, and now some fancy algorithm wants me to connect with him. A rather strange situation appears that reminds me of our mortality. A reminder I could gladly have done without. Another question arises. How many “frozen” accounts are out there, just waiting to haunt someone? A similar feeling overwhelms me when I log on to my old MySpace profile. All these accounts of people (who certainly are still alive) but have abandoned or forgotten their profiles. A place where they spent so much energy and effort at one point. Now, the only thing that remains are their old pictures from the mid 2000:s and the absence of their updates. Unless we delete this information they will forever be floating or “buried” in cyberspace. It is a strange but also a somewhat obvious phenomenon. I have just not given it so much thought. In the history of humanity this is a recent occurring. Suddenly we face the fact of having a rapidly expanding digital graveyard. Will there be a way of handling or auto-deleting all this information? How much of a problem is this, and how are we going to solve it? As a final resting place at a graveyard comes at a price, so to does the digital space that is maintained. This digital real estate, mainly existing of bandwidth, storage and urls, is not a free product. All the annoying commercials are there to keep the product free for users while still covering the costs to the companies. However if you are departed from this world you can no longer click on the links to cover your costs. Will companies in the near future then delete your information to conserve this valuable digital space, or will they keep it and shoulder the cost as a sign of goodwill? This is a sensitive but also interesting topic.

In April this year Google is one of the first companies to address this issue with their new digital afterlife service “Google Death Manager”. On the settings page you can figure out what will happen to all your digital information when you are no longer around, and this is how it works: A timeout period is set for your accounts and when your data has been classed as inactive Google will delete all this information on your behalf. Optionally you can add a trusted contact to gain access to this digital heritage. For now, the digital graveyard is not yet a noticeable problem but there is a reason why Google has taken the initiative to provide this service. Maybe this can be an opportunity for us to figure out some new interesting ways in which we can honor the death of our digital footprint?
Here is where my project starts. How can this be translated into architecture? What I intend to do is to use the “Google death manager” as an input source for my project. This service will control the appearance of a specific room “the exhibition”, and what this room does is that it visualizes the process of all these files being erased from the servers. The process of this digital paper shredder will come to life in this room. A flow of information that is otherwise hidden on the internet. I want to create this place where people can meet and where all this information come together and form a context. A place where people can find retreat and take a break from their daily activities. As soon as you enter this room, you will become a witness of all these files, pictures and documents that is no longer needed. Information that someone who is departed from this world chose to display one last time before it disappears.

Background image is an early concept of an entry-point.
September: My project is placed in Tantolunden in central Stockholm. Through my site analysis (fig a), case studies and site model (fig d) I started to investigate the layout of my project. There is a strong tension between the two mountain tops on the site. One with a park character and one with a wild nature character. In between is a big soccer field with a high fence and this became the starting point for my design process. My intention was to remove the soccer field and open up a stronger bond between these hills. I also found an existing underground structure (a sand silo) which gave me the initiative to dig into the mountain and create a connection up to the wild nature mountain top with the exhibition placed underground.

October: The midcrit plan and section illustrated a sans-silo entry point to the far left. There was also a entry point from where I made the “Concept entrance” image. (fig e) illustrates a sketchmodel of a transparent corten steel wall which surrounds a garden with a labyrinth. After the midcrit I ended up discarding almost fifty percent of my project. What I choose to save was the garden entry point, the placement of the exhibition and the connection to the mountain top.

November: I started to do investigations around different ways of visualizing this flow of information and I choose to work with this korean technology (fig c). My intention is to use these transparent oled displays to create more of a presence of these peoples digital afterlife rather than showing the images one at a time. I have placed the oled screens in clusters that provides for a three dimensional depth. In this way you will experience the process of deleting files as a context of information. A stream of data that will flow at different rates depending of how many is using the service at once. My initial design was these clusters shaped like spheres (fig b) which later became extruded into pillars that extends from the floor to the ceiling (fig g).

December: The word that I want to emphasize for this project is exploration. I made this story around my project that this was an excavation site and someone had found this artifact inside the mountain. They built an underground bridge to excavate the stone and finally they built a monument in the park from this material as a celebration of the room inside. The insight that this story gave me made me do some design changes. For instance, I discarded my investigations around a transparent floor grid and replaced it with a new pavement (a mix between gnejs-rock and concrete) that runs from the “stone garden” outside into the exhibitions lower level making a stronger connection between the two. I also made a new placing of the pillars to enhance the perspective towards the exhibition (fig f).
The technology that I'm using for the exhibition is transparent OLED displays embedded in plexiglass. Displays and plexi-cubes are mounted in a cluster on steel bars that extend from the floor to the ceiling. This provides for the information to be displayed with a three-dimensional depth. A blur of data that flows in a vertical direction. Six displays are mounted on each cube. When put together, the displays sit in between and on the outside of the plexi-cube skeleton.

OLED displays 160 x 160 mm

Plexi-cube 200 x 200 mm

Details
Literature


Tadej Renar, Uroš Rustja (2007) - Between spatial concept and architectural expression of Plecnik’s market in Ljubljana.


Stockolm stad - Parkplan Södermalm 2009.

Uwe Stoklossa (2007) - Blicktrick : vägledning i visuell varseblivning.