

Spontaneous Memorials: Contemporary perspectives on their sociocultural, psychological and organisational impact

International Conference, Manchester, 12-13 June 2025

In-person and Online

<https://www.spontaneoussmemorials.org/conference2025/>

Call for Papers

We are pleased to announce a Call for Papers for the upcoming international conference on **Spontaneous Memorials**, which is organised by the [Institute for Cultural Practices, University of Manchester](https://www.institute-for-cultural-practices.org/), on 12-13 June 2025 (in person and online). The conference aims to explore sociocultural, psychological, curatorial, digital and research methodology dimensions of spontaneous memorials. In particular, it examines the impact that spontaneous memorials have on individuals, communities, organisations and societies. The conference is funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

Spontaneous or grassroots memorials (also termed temporary/makeshift memorials/shrines) appear often in the aftermath of tragic events such as disasters, accidents, terrorist attacks and the death of prominent people. They frequently consist of large numbers of flowers, candles, written notes, soft toys, arts and crafts, clothes and other objects. Such memorialisation has also expanded on social and digital media in ways that blend the physical with the virtual.

Spontaneous memorials have been the subject of diverse academic, policy and practice investigations. This includes disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies on spontaneous memorials as: spatial, material and performative expressions of public grief and memorialisation; rituals of gift-giving; social and political action; counter-memory; protest and social justice; and forms of temporary public art. Relevant work includes, also, critical reflections on collecting, documenting and curating spontaneous memorials. Much of this scholarship is included in two key edited volumes, *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* (edited by Jack Santino, 2006) and *Grassroots Memorials. The Politics of Memorializing Traumatic Death* (edited by Peter Jan Margry and Cristina Sánchez-Carretero, 2011), as well as more recent monographs, book chapters, journal articles, reports and practical guides.

This conference builds on this body of research and practice and invites contributions from scholars, practitioners, emergency planners and responders and policymakers to ongoing and emerging issues and debates on sociocultural, psychological and organisational impact of spontaneous memorials. We, also, welcome contributions that examine one or more case

studies, reflect on lessons learnt and propose recommendations for organisations, communities and individuals. Submissions that explore one more of the following themes are particularly (but not exclusively) welcome:

- **The Creation and Sociocultural Impact of Spontaneous Memorials**

Who participates (or not) and why in physical/digital spontaneous memorialisation? How do people interact with spontaneous memorials? What can the memorials' materiality, format and content tell us about participants' motivations and intentions? Who/what are spontaneous memorials for? What voices are included, marginalised or excluded in spontaneous memorials? How do they intersect with race, gender, class, identity and memory politics? How do spontaneous memorials shape, reflect, communicate or contest broader social, political, and cultural narratives? What is the relationship between spontaneous memorials and official memorials? We invite papers that explore the contribution of spontaneous memorials to the public discourse around their event, both in the short and the longer term.

- **Spontaneous Memorialisation and/in Digital and Social Media**

Spontaneous memorialisation takes place also on digital and social media platforms such as X, Facebook, and Instagram. How does digital spontaneous memorialisation contribute to collective grief and post-event individual and societal recovery? What, if any, may be the harms related to online forms of spontaneous memorialisation? What is the relationship between physical and digital spontaneous memorials? What is the role of media more broadly in the formation of spontaneous memorials? We invite papers that explore the role of media and digital technologies, from social media posts and hashtags to virtual candle lighting, in shaping forms and practices of spontaneous memorialisation.

- **The Psychological Impact of Spontaneous Memorials on Individuals, Communities, and Society**

What is the psychological impact of spontaneous memorials on different groups of people, including bereaved families, survivors and the broader community? Is there a "healing" or "therapeutic" aspect of spontaneous memorials and how can it be articulated and evidenced? How can organisations that have collected spontaneous memorials mitigate the risk of secondary and vicarious trauma for cultural professionals, volunteers and members of the public? We welcome papers from different disciplinary and interdisciplinary fields, including psychology, sociology, museology, disaster studies and memory studies. We, also, encourage contributions on lived experience by people that have been affected by the associated events.

- **Policy and Practice in Collecting, Documenting, and Curating Spontaneous Memorials**

What roles do cultural organisations play in collecting, preserving, documenting and curating spontaneous memorials? How do archives, museums and other memory institutions address and respond to issues and challenges that emerge when deciding (not) to collect physical/digital spontaneous memorials? What is the value, role and use of such collections over time? How do organisations engage with key stakeholders, including bereaved families, survivors and emergency services? We invite presentations that engage with the conceptual, practical and ethical questions surrounding this area of cultural policy and practice, as well as case studies that

illustrate innovative approaches in this field.

- **Research Methodologies of Spontaneous Memorials**

Spontaneous memorials pose considerable challenges for researchers given, among others, their often unpredictable and temporary nature. What ethical, methodological and practical challenges does the study of physical/digital spontaneous memorials present? How can self-care be embedded in the research design? We encourage submissions that discuss innovative and interdisciplinary approaches to research design, fieldwork and data analysis and reporting.

The conference is funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester.

Submission Guidelines: We invite proposals of 300–500 words for **20-minute** presentations (in person or online). Please complete the proposal template and email it to spontaneoussymbolsconference@gmail.com

Deadline for Proposals: Monday 25th November 2024

Details about publication plans of conference papers will be announced in due course.

Conference Organisers

Kostas Arvanitis, University of Manchester

Lesley Cheung, University of Manchester

Robert Simpson, University of Manchester

Programme panel

Peter Jan Margry, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Ana Milosevic, University of Leuven, Belgium

Jan Ramirez, National September 11 Memorial & Museum, USA

Gerome Truc, French National Centre for Scientific Research (CNRS), France

Shona Whitton, IFRC Reference Centre for Psychosocial Support, Denmark

More tba

Keynote Presentation

Pamela Schwartz, Thinc Design, USA

Important Dates

- Deadline for submission of proposals: 25th November 2024
- Notification of acceptance of proposals: By 19th December 2024
- Conference dates: 12-13 June 2025

Conference Venue

University of Manchester and Online

Registration Fee and Bursaries

Participation in the conference is free. Lunch and refreshments will be provided for the in-person attendees.

A limited number of travel bursaries for PhD students and Early Career Researchers are available. Please contact spontaneousmemorialsconference@gmail.com for more details.

Contact

Conference email address: spontaneousmemorialsconference@gmail.com