Sustaining Heritage Culture Through Visual Narrative Design

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Abstract In the Northeast India, certain heritage places need reanalysis for the classification of being an important historical place. Even though, the north eastern states has been bestowed with natural scenic landscape and rich cultures, little has been known to the outside world about the psychological and historical events of its local heroes who sacrificed their lives for the little paradise. The paper aims to explore one of the cultural heritage sites and focus on conveying the information through a visual narrative art form and it might support if the story of the legendary warriors is communicated through visual representation. The paper investigates through field survey and visual design implementation to sustain the historical facts along with the preservation of the heritage site.

Keywords Khongjom war · Kongjom parba · Anglo-Manipur · Design heritage · Cognitive thinking · Indigenous art

1   Introduction

The sustainability of cultural heritage development should have a standard that includes the values, aesthetic design, and legacy being united as a complete whole. According to Welch, Heritage is made present based on the past and individuals treasures such things which have been held in great esteem since preceding ages. We have acknowledged heritage as blessings from the individuals who preceded us and is our bequest of land, language, environments, information, and culture [1]. Soerjoatmodjo in her studies also mentioned heritage as preservation and an exceptional sense of belonging [2]. Andreu discussed heritage values as the significances and ideals of individuals or masses bestow on legacies like collections, buildings, archaeological sites, landscapes along with intangible expressions of culture, such

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as traditions [3]. So, heritage is things that have been continuous with us and its set of experiences ought to be investigated [4].

2 Classification of Cultural Heritage and Importance of Preservation

The world heritage has been classified into two categories under the "World Heritage Convention" as 'cultural heritage' and 'natural heritage' based upon the natural progression or the outcomes of human activities. Under the category of 'cultural heritage', there comes monuments, architectural works, sculpture and paintings, inscriptions, etc. and buildings, architecture with their homogeneity or place and sites valued from the historical, aesthetic, ethnological or anthropological perspective [5]. Labadi discourse about heritage as a building block for sustainable development and is a reminder of the ties between culture, nature and societies in today's changing world [6]. Cultural heritage is a diverse but a source of reminiscence and motivation that contribute to national and local community identity-forming the principal sense of habitation and unity [7]. Vecco also argued that the idea of cultural heritage selection which was based on historic and artistic values should also include the cultural value which is the value of identity and the capacity of the object to interact with memory [8]. Most heritage sites carry dissonances due to inherent anachronisms that result from conflicts of specific communities as can be seen from every site with contrasting narratives being attached and grounded in history [9]. Thus, there is a strong need for preserving the cultural heritage in a precise and justifiable way for our future as well.

The investigation of values in cultural heritage is significant because the primary objective of most of the heritage sites is the conception or solidification of the country-state, its cultural identity, and collective memory [6]. Improving and advancing the social information of the visitors by exploring novel ways of investigation and communication technologies are being taken up by archeological parks, museums, and social establishment [10].

2.1 Existing Techniques of Cultural Heritage Preservation

There has been studies on the areas where concepts, pedagogies and different mediums being investigated and explored by researchers for the preservation of the cultural heritage in a meaningful way. Palombini attempted a theoretical framework for storytelling set up for cultural heritage and recognized that anything conflicting with historical documentation should be avoided and preference should be given to the simplest dynamic to fill the gap between known events [11]. It is a basic yet

effective way for better communication. Valtolina additionally depicted the story-telling objective as a spreading incorporated cultural heritage that enhanced, enrich, maintain and upholds the social-cultural knowledge itself [10]. Soerjoatmodj [2] also discussed that the use of storytelling sessions in her study where the sources of information comprise factual information about the artifacts along with their historical contexts. Marmion also in her examination described the need of developing a long stint with more engaging ways of heritage narrative, resulting in an understanding of the meanings and values beyond the personal level of the heritage viewers [12]. In view of the Marshall McLuhan famous adage that 'the medium is the message', the medium will often impact the way a narrative is told, distributed, and experienced, Kalliopi Kontiza and the team also explained and discussed the sustainability of the storytelling and use of narrative panels as one of the features in the CrossCult application [13]. Kolay described uplifting craft guilds and revitalize cultural heritage awareness by adopting new media as a tool with a meaningful designer intervention in Indian traditional art and craft practice [14]. The medium, although can be digital but should be a communicative and cognitive unity endowed with form and meaning [15].

Thus, it tends to be accepted that different methodologies are being investigated so saving social or cultural heritage stays encompassing and support the trustworthiness of the site with its chronicle realistic and foundation. E-learning, Infographics, catalog and brochure and so on are various mediums alongside new media advancement which are utilized for correspondence and based on the information.

3 Research Gap

Various investigations have been explored in the development of cultural heritage for sustaining the values, although an efficient and simplified way can be introduced by using visual representation or comic which is also one powerful medium for effective communication. Paintings, murals, sculptures, inscription, etc. are some of the know examples in most site, but still, a more convenient approach might be possible using the visuals with narratives. The gratification of the visitors in relation to the cultural heritage and the realization of the peculiarities and historical fact through the medium is what these study searches for.

4 Aim and Objectives

Aim of the study is to explore, identify and develop a Visual Narratives Design (VND) for effective communication in conveying the historical information of the heritage site.

The objectives of the study is to design a framework that will establish or strengthen the cultural identity and traditional value of the place. The study further explores the backgrounds and implement the design thinking for which will have an impact on the visitors and others in better understanding and gain knowledge with an enduring impression.

In this context, one cultural heritage site of India's north east region of Manipur was selected for the exploration and in depth analyses for developing a sustainable way and representation of history through the VND for better communication.

5   Design Framework

The research design approach framework for the study is shown in Fig. 1 below. The study was carried out in two- phase in which the first phase started with the exploration of the site and identifying problematic areas which were validated through a survey and analysis of the result. Afterward, in the next phase, there were collection and finding of the actual historical information, discussion with locals and experts for the development of the Visual Narrative Design (VDN). A prototype was developed and tested through online platform interviews and discussions and validated.

6   Pragmatic Approach

The north eastern states of India comprise of eight states is a region with a rich cultural diversity and natural heritage sites inhabited by different ethnic groups of people (Fig. 2a). Manipur is one of the states which is endowed with unique custom, tradition and history. Some of the popular heritage sites in Manipur includes Kangla Fort, INA Memorial, Imphal War Cemetry, Khongjom War Memorial Complex, etc.
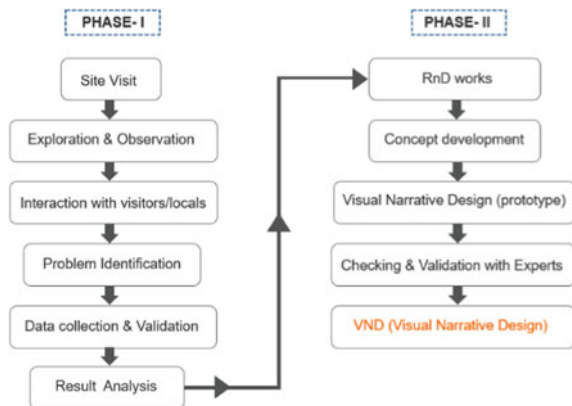

Fig. 1   Framework of experimental study

Fig. 2 India map and Manipur state [19, 20] and site specifics photographs of the Khongjom memorial war complex in Thoubal-Manipur

among others [16]. Each of the sites is well maintained and renovation works are also still in process for protecting and preserving the cultural heritage of the place. These sites have a historical significance and are the essence of Manipur keeping the traditions and cultural values alive. There is a tendency even in Manipur literature in the pursuit of self-identity for deepening the awareness of its national culture [17]. However, due to modernization and the restoration/renovation of structures and landscapes, missing context is visible in some of the sites. For the study, the importance of conveying the historical information is taken up where visitors felt while visiting such historical site which will sustain the cultural and traditional aspect of the future generation.

6.1 Experimental Study

The site chosen for the study is the Khongjom War Memorial Complex, which is located on Kheba Hill in the Thoubal district of Manipur, around 33 km from the Imphal, the capital of the state as shown in Fig. 2a. The site is related to the event of the Anglo-Manipuri War, 1891, and is one historical place of the state. The Complex is one of the popular Cultural Heritage sites and is a major tourist attraction place. The Government of Manipur had conducted a concept drawing competition and invites Architects/Artists/Students to submit concept designs for - Construction of an Anglo- Manipuri War 1891 (Khongjom War) Memorial Tower at Kheba Ching, Khongjom, Manipur [18]. Thus presently, Khongjom War Memorial Complex has a very new renovated look. People visit the area to pay homage to the local heroes that laid down their lives in the Anglo-Manipuri War, 1891 which is called the Khongjom Lan in the local dialect, "Lan" is "War" in the English language. While there are others too, who visit to have a glimpse of the scenic and renovated look?

The site was chosen especially for its historical background which is very important and also people from different areas visited the place at large number due to its renovated look while others to pay tribute. It was necessary to find out whether the visitors are able to get relevant information.

The present look of the Complex is shown in Fig. 2b. Khongjom Entrance gate, Fig. 2c. Statue of Major General Poana Brajabasi at foot hill, and Fig. 2d. Monumental Shrine at hill top.

There are also other attractive areas inside the Complex, which are developed for tourist attraction and hence not covered in the study. The huge monumental structure at the hill top symbolizes the valour and courage of the freedom fighters of Manipur, who fought against the three sides of the British attack in the Anglo-Manipur War, 1891 [21]. The present look inside the Complex is mesmerizing due to the scenic surroundings and the newly constructed artefacts and other developments jointly by the tourism dept. of Manipur along with the state government. Visitors from all places came every day, which includes locals, outside the state and foreigners.

Even though the war memorial has been constructed in the name of great warriors and "Khongjom Day" is observed every year on the 23rd of April in Manipur, the majority of the visitors lacks the understanding and the problem of conveying the information is visible. The beautification is a part of the design heritage, yet the historical information lies hidden beneath the layer of embellishment.

6.2 Data Collection from Visitors

There were 56 numbers (n = 56) participants who joined in the survey experiment which includes the visitors, local people, and experts. A total of nine questions was used for the investigation process. The first three questions, investigates about the visitor's interest in the historical background and view of the newly design Complex. The next three questions were to validate if the visitors know the actual events of the past while the last three questions, queries if alternative solution to bring out the historical information can be helpful.

The field-work study started with a visit to the site and explore the area and it was observed that the historical background information is not available for visitors. There was interaction with the local people to know the ground reality and also a survey was conducted to validate the problems. The visitors include both the local people belonging to the state and also from outside the state. And presently, there is no scope to access the information in the complex. The collection of data through survey of visitors is shown in Fig. 3a, b.

Fig. 3 Data collection from visitors inside the Khongjom War memorial complex

(a)   (b)

After result analysis, it was found that visitors lack the historical information. So, there was a collection of the facts and related information about the event. Based on the resources, a story in shortens form was developed keeping the important phases on account of history only. Visual development was done along with the panels, textual layout in the following stage. There was also discussion with local people, and experts for the factual information. The story in brief about the Khongjom War based on sources describes as follows-

Manipur, earlier known as Kangleipak, was an independent princely state lying between the British India to the west and Myanmar (earlier known as Burma) to the east. The tiny independent state was a barricade for the Burmese expansion, but the downfall of the Burmese empire in the third Anglo- Burmese War in 1885 and internal crisis among the princes after the decease of King Chandrakriti in 1886 gave the opportunity to the British to interfere with the state. In March 1891, five British officers were killed inside the court premises in Imphal. To avenge the deaths, three columns of British troops attacked Manipur from three sides on April 1981- from Cachar in Assam, Kohima in the Naga Hills, and Tamu in Burma. The Tamu column, which marched in from Burma was met with heavy resistance in Thoubal and it is known as the Khongjom War or the Anglo-Manipuri War, 1891. Major General Paona Brajabashi was one of the commander who was giving stiff resistance against the outnumber and well equipped British troops and despite fighting valiantly, the Manipuri army eventually perished against the superior might of the invading British Army [22].

6.3 *Visual Narrative Design Development Process*

After the story is finalized, relevant references (Fig. 4a–d) were collected for the visual development and the prototype of the design was created for testing and validation.

Figure 4a is an old painting which depicts the event of the Khongjom war event by renowned artist, R.K.C.S and a portrait of Major general Poana Brajabashi in Fig. 4b and the traditional Manipuri warrior customs in Fig. 4c is shown. A photograph of

(a)   (b)   (c)   (d)

Fig. 4 References [23, 24] and, a photograph inside the Kangla for visual development
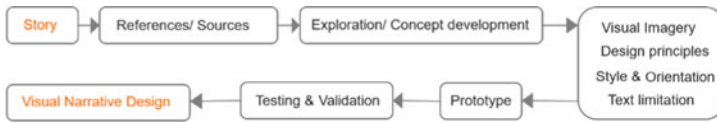
Fig. 5 Process of VDN development

the reinstate Kangla Sha of the Uttra - the coronation hall in the Kangla Palace is shown in Fig. 4d.

The prototype VND consists of four pages with 15 panels (Fig. 7) and is a scenic representation of the event with a short description which will allow viewers to get an immersive content of the historical events. The design is similar to a comic strip, but here the collective use of a single narrative is used for multiple frames at times breaking the traditional style of a normal comic strip where captions along with speech or thought balloons are used separately for individual frames. The details of the design process are showed in Fig. 5.

6.4 Result and Discussion

In the survey conducted on the site, there were n = 56 participants and nine questions were used to understand and validate the problem that was observed. The first question was asked if they would take interest in knowing the history of the heritage site and there were cent% agreed on it. The second question inquired whether the makeover of the Complex is attractive and preserves the cultural value to which 95% agreed. In the third question, the opinion about the initiative of the Govt. Of Manipur had taken up in organizing concept competition for the construction of the site was raised and 85% supported the move. The fourth question was to examine if they have known the Khongjom War event of 1891 and here 53% were negative and only 36% were positive while 11% have little knowledge. The fifth question was asked if they know Khongjom Parba which is an indigenous ballad song that narrates the event and 54% know the art form, 39% have no idea and 7% cannot say. The sixth question was queried whether they know about Major General Paona Brajabashi and 50% of the participants do not know while 9% have no answer and only 41% actually knows. In the seventh question, it was inquired whether they feel that the design elements inside the Complex are nice, but there is a lack of historical information to which 77% agreed. The eighth questioned about the idea of visual sequences like a painting in series/illustration or other static sequences inside the Complex for the historical facts and 96% likes the idea. The ninth question discussed the preservation and protection of the heritage site with relevant information to which 98% agreed. The graphical representation of the survey is shown in Fig. 6.

It was evident from the survey that the historical information on the site remains invisible to the visitors. After the analysis of the survey, the next step of validating the effectiveness of communication through the VND was taken up through qualitative
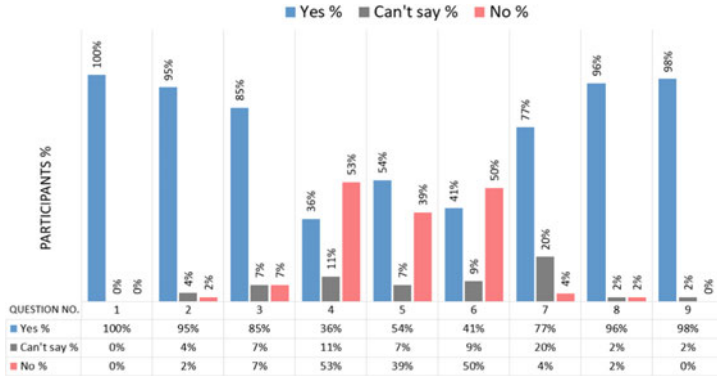
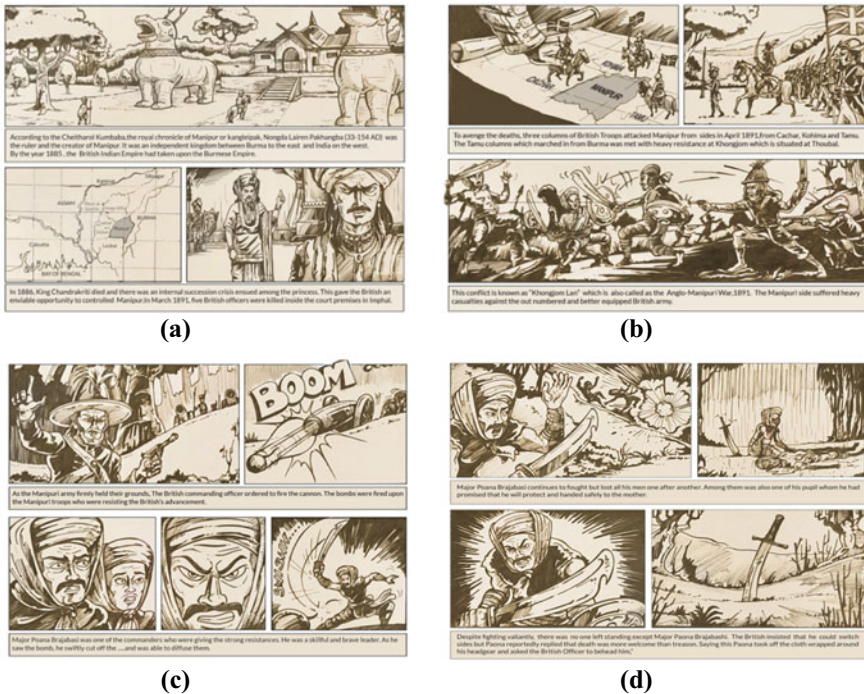**Fig. 6** Graphical representation of data

(a)

(b)

(c)

(d)

Fig. 7 Final visual narrative design output

survey and local people, experts, and interested party communicated through online platforms, mobile phone, etc. have supported and expressed their views.

6.5   Visual Narrative Design Output

Visual Narratives Design (VND) is an alternative way of visual storytelling where the historical information is designed along with a short description especially for the visitors. The development process is quite similar to the concept art development for making a film/series. But, the goal is a form of narrative illustration that can be exhibited either painted or printed, projected or, made a permanent relief sculpture at the Complex site for displaying information.

Traditionally, it is established that a narrative has two aspects- a story in a sequence of events and the expressions or shape-form through which the story is presented for communication [25]. So, visual communication is a very strong medium and has a long-lasting impression. People get cultured through stories which in turn becomes the protectors of the culture and the social customs of different ethnic groups [26]. Thomson in his study of the Four Story Forms: Drama, Film, Comic Strip, Narrative mentioned the comic strip as the most visual because of its illustrative presentation [27]. The VDN takes account of all the established concepts while coming up with the final design output.

The final VDN consists of four pages with the narrative detail. The first page consists of a single panel with narrative in the upper part and the follow up panel have two frames with a single narrative (Fig. 7a). The second (Fig. 7b) page has a panel with two frames along with a single narrative and a single panel with a narrative in the lower section.

The third page (Fig. 7c) has a panel with two frames and a single narrative on the upper part and a panel with three frames and a single narrative in the lower section. Page fourth (Fig. 7d) has a double frame with a single narrative for each of both.

The statements of the 17 individuals (n = 17) which includes historians, designers, educators, among others, who participated in the online virtual platform interview (Table 1) is listed below.

The overall statement shows that the VDN is a decent approach for effective communication and can help visitors know the actual happenings of the event which seems to fade away along with the modernization and other influences. It can be flexible and the mediums can vary depending upon the availability of resources.

The Khongjom Memorial War Complex being an important historical site need restoration in that information through any medium, so that the legacy is carried forward into the future meaningfully. The present development of the site has made the place more attractive resulting in the increase of visitors, which is a good thing, although the lack of in depth historical information was observed. The problem of the authentic sources remains in the new age where information is available at our fingertips and even real stories and events get fabricated with changing times. Hence, the traditional values and the cultural aspect of the heritage should be given due respect for the future.

The study has provided new insight by introducing the VND process which is effective, reliable, and has some significant quality in comparison to other form of communication as follows-

Table 1 Statements of viewer of the VND

Name	Designation	Comment
Mr. Chingtham Budha Singh	Retired, PWD, Govt. of Manipur	Very good part of our cultural and historical documentation
Mr. Geetchandra Rajkumar	Software Engineer, TCS, Brampton, Ontario	Informative, well designed and clearly narrates the historic events in a concise way. Great work and good luck
Dr. Khwairakpam Amitab	Faculty, NEHU, Shillong	A good approach to convey historical information and will aid in retention
Mr. Chingtham Babloo Singh	Branch Manager, SBI - Shillong	Gives a clear and quick historical background and is an innovative way of telling history
Mr. Kosygin Leishangthem	Faculty, MTU - Imphal	Impressive!! Children will love it in colour and bigger fonts almost double
Mr. Sarangthem Boby Singh	Lecturer, N.S.A, Imphal	Speechless and full of deep significance for the generations
Mrs. Sunita Thokchom	Bank Analyst, Scotia Bank, Canada	A great initiative and is very interesting to read. Well done and good luck
Mr. Ngangom Jitendra Singh	Teacher, B.H. School, Kangpokpi	The visuals and the narration are well timed and can easily understand
Mr. Surajkumar Meisnam	Business, Kwakeithel, Imphal	Clearly depicts the Khongjom Lan event
Mr. Yumnam Shyam Singh	3DArtist, Lamzing Technologies, Singjamei	Great in few visuals
Mr. Moirangthem Tondon Singh	School Teacher, Khongman, Imphal	Good idea we are proud of you
Mrs. Kamalabati Rk	Business, Chingmeirong, Imphal	Excellent!
Mr. Chingtham Pushpendra Kumar	ASI, Manipur Police Department	A brilliant idea. It will help visitors understand the significance of the site
Mr. Kh. Dinesh Singh	Proprietor & Artist, Bimola Art, Mumbai	These illustrations are easily understandable
Mrs. Naorem Yaipharenbi Chanu	Teacher, Shiv Nadar School, Noida-U.P	Very appealing and can help in wakefulness about the event
Mr. Rajkumar Chandrajit Singh	Business, The Library and Cultural Centre, Keibung	A new form of comic style with no dialogue but effective
Mr. Washington Meitei	Designer, NC Design and Services, Imphal West	People will appreciate the history through this art form

- Delivery of historical information in shortens forms with lasting impressions for the reader.
- No requirement of tools and technology or any other application.
- The learning process is made easier with intriguing visuals and relevant textual content.
- The alteration from the traditional comic book style or graphic novel.

There were difficulties faced in the study due to the pandemic situation resulting fewer visitors and also unable to meet maximum officials and volunteers.

7   Conclusion

The case study was carried out to find out whether the VND could be implemented as an effective medium and presents the event in a condensed form. The objectives of the study were to fulfil the need of conveying appropriate information through the design approach. Based on the results, it will be fair enough to say that the design can be utilized as an effective tool and will serve the purpose.

Shifting of technological tools in delivering the information might see another day in the future as well. The younger generation is mostly the one who will benefit from the VDN as they are prone to be misled by the change of design aesthetics and the changing environment of the heritage site. But ultimately, they are the one who will carry forward the legacy in time to come. Although, there will always be areas that will need further study and exploration for future scope. Application of modern technology might enhance the way of communication in the coming time as the evolution of the medium keeps on changing the traditional way. More study on the development might be required as this is just the base groundwork to fulfil the need of the hour.

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