

## Turning the City into a Memoryscape: Gunter Demnig's Stumbling Stones in the Netherlands

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From the early 1990s, the German artist Gunter Demnig has been creating a monument to commemorate individuals who were murdered and persecuted during World War II by laying so-called stumbling stones in front of houses from which these people were deported by the Nazis to prisons, concentration camps, and other death facilities, or where people lived who responded to persecution by emigrating or committing suicide. By laying over 60,000 small brass plaques, attached to concrete cubes, in the pavement in front of these houses Demnig has created a vast monument in ten countries all over Europe. His motto is 'A person is only forgotten when his or her name is forgotten'.

Since the first laying of stumbling stones in the Netherlands in 2007, hundreds of these small memorial plaques have been laid in over some 100 Dutch towns and villages, predominantly for Jews. The laying of stumbling stones has turned these towns into memoryscapes, in which the unsuspecting passer-by will stumble over reminders of a traumatic past. The creation of this dispersed monument has transformed the commemoration of the Holocaust in the Netherlands: as stumbling stones focus on every victim individually, this creates a much more personalized and unmediated way of commemorating. This enables post-war generations to empathize with this person and his or her life story and thus to turn abstract numbers into a face and a story present-day people can connect to. Of the Dutch Jews, 102,000 were killed, making the Netherlands the country in Western Europe with the highest percentage Jews having been murdered.

In my contribution, I will assess some important issues related to this project and its consequences for 'heritaging' the Holocaust. First, I will address the fact that most often the initiative to lay stumbling stones is taken by outsiders, that is, groups and individuals who are not survivors or descendants, but people of post-war generations who feel connected to this history and aim to give new meaning to this by creating small places of memory. This also means that relatives of the people commemorated are most often only involved during (or even after) the process of organizing the laying of stumbling stone, which greatly affects the passing-on of memories and stories within the survivors' and descendants' families.

In many cases the creation of these physical places of memory is linked to other ways of commemorating, in books, brochures, films, and documentaries produced at the occasion of the laying of the stones, but also in a digital form by creating special websites and by adding information to the 'Digital Monument to the Jewish Community in the Netherlands' ([www.joodsmonument.nl](http://www.joodsmonument.nl)). This serves not only as a digital place of memory but also as a platform for people to meet and share information, stories, and pictures. This poses several interesting questions relating to the (re)creation of Holocaust heritage through digital media. Can we observe a new memorial culture of the Holocaust as a result of digitizing and the use of social media? How do new, international communities of memory arise and contribute to answering national questions and needs? In short: how will the intertwined creation of new physical and immaterial heritage of the Holocaust affect its legacy in the Netherlands and Europe in the years to come?

CV

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Since 1999, he has held a funded chair for the Regional History and Ethnology of Brabant in the Tilburg School of Social and Behavioral Sciences. As such, he is a member of the Department of Sociology. In addition, since 2004, he has been associate professor for social and cultural history in the same School. Since 2008 he has been teaching European History and Culture, Medieval History, and Historical Methodology in the bachelor programme Liberal Arts and Sciences of University College Tilburg.

He published extensively on the medieval history of the Low Countries and on the interplay between history, cultural heritage, and (regional) identity. In 2009, he collected his essays on regional history, cultural heritage, and identity in the Brabant region in a volume called *Maakbaar erfgoed*, 'makeable heritage'. Since 2010 he has been involved in the laying of stumbling stones in his hometown Tilburg and in research on the Jewish community of Tilburg between 1930 and 1945. Together with Carine van Vugt and Jeroen Neus, filmmakers at Stichting Verhalis, he made the documentary film *Here was Bertram: Search for a Lost Life* (at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7nTpuCZJTE>). In 2016, he published a book entitled *House of Memories: Uncovering the Past of a Dutch Jewish Family* (Hilversum: Verloren).