



## **Ave Civitas**

During the PORTICO conference in Gent one of the workshop focused on presenting and discussing the preliminary results of the Ave Civitas project. Eddie Westbroek from Tinker imagineers and responsible for this part of the PORTICO activities presented the main ideas behind Ave Civitas, the first results of a workshop in digital storytelling in Utrecht. He discussed with the audience the potential value and possibilities of using digital storytelling as a method to enforce the link between city heritage and the inhabitants of a city.

## **Digital storytelling**

The main aim of the Ave Civitas project is to find new methods and ways to create a relevant link between heritage sites and the public. Tinker specifically focus on the contemporary residents of each town and how their current day lives are framed and influenced by the heritage of their respective cities. They are using a method called digital storytelling where residents of a city are invited to tell personal stories about the value and importance of a specific heritage site (in Utrecht the Domtower). Out of these personal stories they create short videos.

## **Workshop storytelling in Utrecht**

In Eddie's presentation in Gent he took time to explain the value of personal storytelling and how personal stories can show the value people attach to heritage sites. He told that the storytelling participants of the two day workshop in Utrecht all shared an enthusiasm in sharing their personal stories about how the Domtower had been a symbol for them of home, future, sadness, and other personal memories. According to him the result of the workshop in Utrecht was twofold. First of all it created a clear insight in the value of letting residents tell and share stories on how they value and connect to specific heritage of a city. And secondly they all produced a short video story that was a witness of this value and appreciation.

When showcasing the videos in the workshop in Gent, Eddie continued to explain that these stories were another way of showing and sharing how heritage can play an important role in people's daily life apart from the official existing historical value. Making this tangible through personal stories in a video format makes it possible to discuss and show what role heritage can play for the residents of the city.

At the same time however Eddie pointed out that, as the videos are not produced by documentary makers but made by the storytellers themselves, they do not have the same quality and dynamic as we are used to see on any televised broadcast of stories. The digital stories are authentic yet also made by amateurs. And it is therefore of importance when showing the videos, to frame them in the right context.



## **Discussion**

After Eddie's presentation a vivid and fascinating discussion emerged. There were several questions on whether these kind of local, and very personal stories were at all relevant. Some noted that the video stories did not have the quality of storytelling that we are used to and that it would be better to create professional produced stories with people that had something more exciting to tell. Others disagreed with this point of view and seemed to be charmed by these small yet authentic stories and believed them to be useful and interesting for use in the context of the heritage sight.

The discussion then evolved into the 'use' and 'usefulness' of the stories. Some stressed the importance of a good context for the stories to become relevant. Just publishing them on a website was in their opinion not the most relevant of ideas. Instead it would be better, some suggested to integrate these stories for instance a museum or visitor enter in vicinity of the heritage sight. While learning about the official history of the heritage spot these stories could be another way to appreciate the role these historical places still play in everyday life.

A parallel discussion on the value of digital storytelling erupted when some remarked that these stories did not add anything to the knowledge of the heritage sight in question. These stories were too personal and could not even be checked on their truthfulness. Others however felt these personal stories had an additional value to offer and expressed that the official historical version of an heritage sight, could use another kind of more personal form of presenting its meaning.

The discussion during the workshop was passionate and gave many pointers as to how to continue with Ave Civitas. In the coming months three more workshops in Gent, Chester and Köln will be organized. And the partners also will have to find out how to create a context in which these digital stories can be showed and used as to bring the residents of the cities closer to their historical treasures.