Tales of Things

‘If these walls could talk…’ So goes the saying. Well, now they can, thanks to a joint innovation from UCL, Edinburgh College of Art, Brunel University, the University of Dundee and the University of Salford. Tales of Things electronic Memory (TOTeM) is a web-based platform that gives objects – anything from walls to shoes – a voice. It allows users to imbue a thing with the memories they link to it.

Tagging technology
The technology lets people tag anything with a memory, and for anyone in the future to retrieve that memory. It makes use of both QR (Quick Response) and RFID codes – tags that carry digital data such as a URL.

The website, www.talesofthings.com lets you upload a photo and a story about any object and print off a unique QR tag to label it with. Future owners or passers-by can scan the tag using any QR scanning technology. This takes them to the website, where they can read the story and add to it.

Dr Hudson-Smith said, “QR codes have been around for about 15 years. But they’re usually read-only. Our website makes them writable too – you can add to the data they hold.”

A meeting of ideas
Inspiration for Tales of Things came from a ‘Sandpit’. Not a child’s play space, but a novel way for research councils to assign funding to projects. Hopeful grant recipients met for a week of intensive brainstorming, and pitched their ideas to the EPSRC (Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council). Attendees were asked to bring along one item they believed could change the world.

Dr Andrew Hudson-Smith, Director of UCL’s Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis, said, “Tales of Things was born from a meeting between the mobile technology of an iPhone and the heritage of a Thai memory bowl, which chimes to signify the memories of its owner.”

Real-world applications
Wired magazine listed the technology, which it called ‘chatitecture’, as one of top 25 big ideas of 2011. TOTeM lets buildings talk. Once a building has been labelled, all you have to do is point your camera phone at a tag to access and add to multimedia content about a building.

“There are so many other applications,” said Dr Hudson-Smith. “We’ve already partnered with Oxfam, to give their second hand goods a voice – the week we trialled it, the shop achieved 45% more sales. People love to hear the story of what they’re buying.”

They’re also using the technology to encourage interaction with museum artefacts, and hope to use it in partnership with publishers so that readers can leave audio commentary on academic text books.

Working together
The fact that so many research teams are involved may seem daunting to some – but for Dr Andrew Hudson-Smith, it’s been a boost. “It’s been really refreshing having the other researchers to bounce ideas off. We each contribute what we’re good at. UCL is doing the technology, and Dundee made a fantastic wand casing to read the codes in Oxfam.”

“The site has been live for about a year now,” said Dr Hudson-Smith. “And the write-ups have been great. It’s exciting to see where it’s going to go next.”

Find out more
If you want to try Tales of Things for yourself, visit www.talesofthings.com and try uploading your favourite stuff. And look out for tags around London. Some buildings have a great story to tell.
About UCL

UCL (University College London) was established in 1826 and is ranked as one of the world’s top-ten universities. The university is a modern, outward-looking institution, with more than 4,000 academic and research staff committed to engaging with the major issues of our times. It has a global reach, with 34% of its students coming from outside the UK, from almost 140 countries.

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About Research Collaborations & Studentships

UCL is recognized as a research powerhouse; our research ranges across all disciplinary areas, from fundamental biological research that develops our understanding of the nature of life, or from philosophical discourse, through applied engineering and biochemical manufacturing, to clinical practice and drug discovery.

UCL establishes collaborative research partnerships with charities, commerce and industry to enable the impact of our research to be widened and deepened, to benefit the global community and deliver social and economic benefit to the UK.

Postgraduate research students are essential to the development of the research base, the future academic community and researchers in business and industry. UCL’s innovative PhD programmes also provide excellent opportunities for collaborative research activity with external organisations.

UCL Enterprise

Enterprise is important to all universities, but resonates particularly with UCL. From our inception we were created as an enterprising institution, with a bold ambition to create a University dedicated to the greatest good for the greatest number. This principle has underpinned the evolution of modern-day UCL, a confident and enthusiastic community of enterprising researchers, educators, and scholars, working together for the immediate, medium and long-term benefit of society.

UCL Enterprise provides UCL’s structures for engaging with business for commercial and societal benefit. It includes three units: UCL Advances, UCL Business and UCL Consultants. Together, they provide access to the capabilities and resources of the UCL community to help businesses start, grow and develop.

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About UCL Enterprise and Research Collaborations & Studentships

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