Storytelling is one of the oldest ways of communicating. Before written history, oral tradition helped people to create identity and understand society. Today, storytelling is being used to explore relationships between cultures and across continents.

Professor Paul Sermon is working on an AHRC-funded project to link central Delhi and London as part of India’s UnBox Festival. Alongside seven other UK researchers, Professor Sermon’s research examines the particular challenges relevant to today’s society, as it aims to reimagine the role of citizens and to consider the implications of this for the management of services and infrastructures within future cities.

The digital revolution is coming quickly to India, and one of the project’s aims is to leave a legacy for people in Delhi which presents a distinct, narrative-driven approach to technology rather than a conventional social media experience. “We’ve looked for analogies for the impact we’re trying to create and one is San Francisco in the 1970s,” said Professor Sermon. “Computer networks were just beginning to emerge and were an experimental medium in shaping the artistic community, creating links between artists in different places and across disciplines. There’s a very clear sense that technology had a big influence on art and on society in California and that’s part of our ambition today.”

"People have been moved from so-called slum areas into new government-agreed settlement zones,” said Professor Sermon. “They’re allocated plots measuring three by four metres for new homes and we’ll be using the same sized spaces to create two cubes, one in London and one in Delhi, which we can merge into the same video space, connecting two worlds and creating a space where people can have playful but meaningful experiences, controlling technology not through a keyboard and mouse but using their bodies to help form this process of becoming an engaged and responsible citizen."

The project will also examine how ephemeral and un-rehearsed stories can be captured, creating a documentary archive where participants record their experiences and build a picture of responses which can be preserved for the future, becoming an ever more valuable ‘snapshot’ record over time. The project’s outcomes are of relevance not just to India, but to other countries around the globe, as the UN estimates that by 2050, 70 per cent of the world’s population will live in cities and the burden on public services will increase.

Stories can also be told through installation art, and Professor Matthew Cornford, as one half of the partnership Cornford & Cross, has created a body of work that builds new understanding of human histories. It Happened Here involved the removal of the formal courtyard garden in The Commandery museum in Worcester, the site of the defining battle of the English Civil War in 1651, replacing it with turf specially transported from County Derry/Londonderry in Ulster. The installation of a lawn, a key convention of an English garden, acts as a war memorial and reminder of a traumatic historical narrative. It Happened Here continues Cornford & Cross’s commitment to making site-specific installations that create new stories about historic conflicts, such as the narrative explored in Words are not Enough, a temporary peace garden positioned over an abandoned Cold War era nuclear bunker.