

Heritage Interpretation as Public Discourse

Towards a New Paradigm

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Heritage interpretation – the constellation of communicative techniques that attempt to convey the public values, significance and meanings of a heritage site, object or tradition – is central to understanding the wider characteristics of heritage itself. Indeed, the practice of heritage interpretation, in its broadest definition,¹ has been traced back at least 4,000 years (Dewar, 2000). From the time of the Egyptian exile Sinuhe's twentieth century BCE travel journal through the Land of Retenu (Baines, 1982); through Herodotus's sometimes dubious fifth-century BCE accounts of ancient Near Eastern signs and wonders (Thomas, 2002); to Pausanias's second-century CE travel guide to the ancient shrines of Greece (Alcock and Cherry, 2001); through the pilgrim guides and guidebooks of the Middle Ages (Moerman, 1997; Osterrieth, 1989); to the itineraries and tutors' lectures of the Grand Tour in the Age of Enlightenment (John, 1985), a changing array of interpreters and guides has continued the practice of explaining and reflecting on the significance of historic monuments and landscapes around the world.

In the nineteenth century, with the first waves of mass tourism, the role of the guide-interpreter became more specialized and professionalized (Erik, 1985). Whether attached to a specific site (and eventually trained and licensed by national governments), these professionals, serving as escort and interpreter for a group through a full itinerary of heritage attractions, were recognized as authoritative sources of information, alongside other media such as maps, directional signs, and Baedekers and Blue Guides (Koshar, 1998). Yet in whatever form the interpretation was conveyed to the tourist or reading public – and whether regarded as reliable, bogus or boring – it was primarily a form of monologual narration that was meant to proceed unidirectionally from the guide to the audience.

The classic modern work on the techniques of this profession, *Interpreting Our Heritage* by the US Park Service official Freeman Tilden, has been, since its first publication in 1957, the most important single source of the philosophy of heritage

¹ As defined in the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICIP, 2008, p. 3): Interpretation comprises “the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site. These can include print and electronic publications, public lectures, on-site and directly related off-site installations, educational programmes, community activities, and ongoing research, training, and evaluation of the interpretation process itself.”

interpretation, both cultural and natural (Tilden, 1957). It has been praised, updated, analysed and itself reinterpreted over the last fifty years. At the heart of Tilden's theoretical vision were his six guiding principles, each of which stressed the unique role of the heritage interpreter in connecting the visitor with the heritage.² Artfulness, spurring the imagination, and targeting the audience were the central factors. Later followers of Tilden expanded the number of principles (Beck and Cable, 1998), but the goal of instrumental emotional discourse from an interpreter to listeners remained the same. It was the communication not only of information, but also of an ethical order in which the conservation of heritage became the end of a presumably inevitable behavioural chain (Ham, 2007a). "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" was Tilden's much quoted dictum (1957, p. 38), which has served as a guiding motto of the interpretation enterprise and the worldwide profession it has spawned. At its heart, this approach to heritage interpretation is more methodology than theory; it is a method of face-to-face communication in which the content of the interpretation is less important than the skill with which it is conveyed. Facticity is perhaps its single normative element; appreciation of a site's value, authenticity and significance were its intended effects.

Yet as David Uzzell has noted (1998), this traditional view of heritage interpretation unquestioningly assumes the audience's basic openness to being persuaded. If performed with enough verve and ingenuity, interpretation, it is implied, will have its intended effect. The audience is assumed to be distinct only as individuals, whose "personality and experience" are the targets of interpretation's direct relational appeal. The epistemic content of the interpretation – its view of historical "truth" – is seen as relatively unproblematic, derived from the factual perspectives of historians, architects and archaeologists. Yet the technique of influencing the heritage public to respond to scientifically based information with emotion as well as action closely resembles the techniques of public health, environmental and advertising campaigns (Ham and Weiler, 2003). Interpretation is seen as an action designed to promote public appreciation for the importance of heritage, its vulnerability, and the necessity

2 – Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

- Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based on information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is to some degree teachable.
- The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole person rather than any phase.
- Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of 12) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

for its conservation, as carried out by the official stewards of the locality or the state. But increasingly, heritage is not seen as an undifferentiated resource, nor are its official stewards always regarded as impartial guardians of a shared heritage (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

In cases of heritage disputes in zones of ethnic combat or interstate rivalry, a Tildenian conception of “heritage” as an unalloyed good that can be unproblematically interpreted to increase public support for conservation flies in the face of seemingly irreconcilable conflicts over *what* heritage is significant and *how* it should be interpreted. Tilden’s six principles of interpretation fail to address adequately the challenge of definitively interpreting conflicting perspectives. Among the many examples that could be cited are the contested history of Jerusalem (Silberman, 2001), the political controversies over the Kasubi tombs in Uganda (Kigongo and Reid, 2007), the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Colwell-Chanthaphonh, 2003), the cultural affinities and territorial significance of the Preah Vihear temple on the border of Thailand and Cambodia (Meyer, 2009), or the conflict between Hindus and Muslims over religious primacy at Ayodhya in India (Bernbeck and Pollock, 1996).

These are only the most famous examples of interpretive conflict, for in our era of “place branding”, identity politics, territorial disputes and tourism-based economics, the control of heritage sites and objects has become a bone of contention between regions, localities, diasporic communities and nation-states all over the world. Questions of urban renewal, gentrification, demographic dispossession, sovereign claims to the repatriation of plundered or looted relics – and more sensitively – the control of human remains found at archaeological sites, all pose even more complex challenges to conventional ideas of conservation and the possibility of a “universal” method of interpretation that will mobilize support for it (Silverman and Ruggles, 2007). As this chapter suggests, the changing social, economic and symbolic value of heritage requires a new theoretical paradigm to replace, or perhaps place in a new context the long-cherished concepts of Tilden. Indeed, as Uzzell suggested, heritage interpretation “is stuck in a rut where the *how* has become more important than the *why*” (1998, p. 12).

The answer to the “why” question, I believe, lies in heritage interpretation’s wider social function – not merely as an effective communication medium, but as a deeper reflection on the rights and proper role of the non-expert public in shaping an ever evolving vision of the past.

From monologue to public participation

Carefully prepared texts and scripts are omnipresent in heritage interpretation – ranging from simple informational panels, to vivid storytelling, to character-based interpretation, visitor centre videos, carefully designed interpretive trails, to elaborate (and costly) virtual environments. Although the interpretive media in use at

various sites may dramatically differ in complexity or sophistication, the process that most of them embody is consistent with the traditional monological approach: a unidirectional presentation of carefully selected and arranged information derived from an expert source, meant to be accepted by the public as authoritative. Particular interest has been shown for analysis of the cognitive impact of various interpretation programmes (e.g. Ham, 2007*b*). Through questionnaires, interviews and tests designed to measure the factual recall and emotional satisfaction of visitors (particularly schoolchildren), investigators have begun to analyse what goes on at the other end of the communicative chain. As mentioned above, there is more at stake today than generalized public education and the cultivation of support for conservation. In addition to political issues of identity and ethnic legitimization, public reactions to interpretation have important economic consequences in the so-called “Experience Economy,” where heritage sites are often developed as revenue-generating entertainment venues (Silberman, 2007). The answers to certain questions quite unconnected with historical significance or Outstanding Universal Value can determine whether a ticketed site will succeed or fail: is it fun? Do children as well as adults enjoy it? Was there enough to see and do there? Would you recommend it to friends? With international development agencies encouraging hard-pressed regions to take advantage of their heritage resources as engines of development (Cernea, 2001), the artful simulation of sanitized authenticity attractive to tourists has often become an end in itself.

It may be useful to examine the processes of interpretation more deeply – both those of the professional interpreters and of the members of the public that interpret what they say. Ablett and Dyer (2009) have proposed the use of hermeneutics (the study of the principles of literary, philosophical, and social interpretation) in order to understand its functioning within the heritage field. Going beyond conceptions of one-way, instrumental communication, of “getting the (scientific) message across,” the hermeneutic approach posits two additional interpretive actions that occur simultaneously: (1) the engagement of professional interpreters with their audience in order to “relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor” (Tilden’s first principle); and (2) the audience members’ active efforts from their own perspective to interpret what an interpreter is saying about a particular heritage object or subject – and how it adds, meshes, or clashes with their personal understandings of human nature and history (McIntosh and Prentice, 1999).

This is far different from the communications theory perspective, in which the audience is understood as a passive receptor and an interpretive presentation is deemed to be successful when the audience has “correctly” understood what the interpreter was trying to say. It is rather a simultaneous occurrence of two interpretive activities that both have their roots in contemporary social perceptions of class, race and culture and each has its distinct cognitive significance. Each party to this interaction, both interpreter and listener, tries to fill in the gaps and unspoken assumptions of the other, to call to mind issues of significance that the other has ignored or

omitted, and above all, to use both external information and internal interpretation to produce a convincing picture of a particular aspect of historical reality.

Moreover, in each these simultaneous acts of interpretation, the epistemology may be entirely different. For professional interpreters, the basis for their “Authorized Heritage Discourse” (Smith, 2006) may be the historiographical orientation of aesthetics, nationalism, nostalgia, environmentalism or chronological progression, seeing time as a sequence of readily identifiable eras, which are linked to narratives of progress, increasing complexity, or alternating *flourit* and decline (Silberman, 2010). For any particular visitor or community member, the epistemological and even ontological framework for understanding a heritage site may be different – drawn from unquestioning acceptance of academic authority, ethnic pride or resentment, class consciousness, religious beliefs, folk traditions or inherited family memories – seeing the past as an undifferentiated, deep well of experience and symbols of the “once upon a time” (Robb, 1998). These distinctive modes of interpretation are not exclusive alternatives but are all interwoven components of the complex ideation of sociocultural life. All have their value. Empirical facts have value in cataloguing, typologizing and evaluating hypotheses. Personal or group attitudes towards certain evocative symbols or associations can offer powerful emotional bases for action and expressions of solidarity. Put simply, public interpretation can be an activity where all these distinct modes of cognition are encouraged to be openly expressed and reveal themselves to each other, each enriching all the others with unexpected understandings and insights about the significance and value of heritage.

Heritage and the public sphere

Where should such dialogues – or “polylogues” – of differing sources of information and conceptions of value take place? During a tour? Outside the site? At home? In public planning meetings? On historical TV documentaries or in special-interest internet sites? In discussions of historical novels, films or video games? I would suggest that we look beyond the sequestered world of official commemoration techniques and administration to consider heritage interpretation to be a profoundly important public activity. Its place in public discourse is no less important than other debates about social policy, development issues or immigration restrictions – all of them based on an evolving consensus of past, present or future “national character.” For if cultural heritage is indeed “unique and irreplaceable property” of great importance “for all the peoples of the world” (UNESCO, 1972, Preamble), it should be a serious subject for informed debate and reflection in the public sphere.

By “public sphere” I mean a place of popular deliberation, not to be confused either with the public institutions of government or public places such as parks, highways or sidewalks where there is rarely organized discussion of important issues – except in times of demonstrations and protests, where those who see themselves as

ignored or aggrieved make their angry voices heard. The public sphere is that arena of debate and discussion where ideas and perspectives are exchanged and consensus arrived at between nominal equals – the most basic constitution of democracy. In this, I follow the social philosopher and political theorist Jürgen Habermas, who has recognized the importance of the public sphere as a place of democratic deliberation and has traced its history from the Middle Ages to the present day (Habermas, 1991; Calhoun, 1992; and for a good general introduction, Goode, 2005). Habermas's historical analysis has great relevance for heritage interpretation and heritage practice in general, as it is interwoven both in the physical monuments of "officialized" public representation and in the ways in which the public relates to them.

For Habermas, the great monumental ecclesiastical and royal structures (some of which that comprise early inscriptions on the World Heritage List) represent a public sphere in which there was no discussion, but rather faced the mass of subjects with ideological "shock and awe". Power and powerlessness were quite clear-cut; the justification of power was inscribed on the landscape in those monumental forms. Then, according to Habermas, in the early modern period, with the gradual disintegration of the absolutist state and the rise of a "middle class" of economically entrepreneurial merchants, and eventually manufacturers, a new kind of public sphere arose (Habermas, 1991, pp. 14–24). In the smoky urban coffee shops, scientific societies, literary journals, and in the pages of newspapers and other novel journalistic publications of the bourgeois intelligentsia of the Age of Enlightenment, a new kind of public sphere arose. Neither part of the state, nor private possession of any individual, this widely dispersed, mediated conversation offered a forum for free and often spirited debate and discussion on important matters of the day, on evolving technologies and their social and economic impacts, on visions of the future, and shared creative expressions of identity and political philosophy that – at least in Habermas's initial estimation – prepared the ground for the first modern Western deliberative democracies.³

In time, however, the very qualities that Habermas most prized in this first modern public sphere – the ability of individuals to participate in its free-flowing discourse, without the quality or power of their ideas to be directly linked to their social rank – was transformed and eventually extinguished with subsequent political developments (Habermas, 1991, pp. 181–220). Put briefly, as the absolute state withered away to be replaced by the bureaucratic nation-state in the late eighteenth century, the voluntary public sphere of deliberative discourse was transformed into the formalized structures of representative democracy, with the public deputizing full-time parliament members to carry on the public deliberations for them. And finally, according to Habermas, with the decline of widespread public engagement in political dis-

³ For a convenient review of the critiques of Habermas's evaluation of the freedom and openness of this original public sphere, noting particularly its class, gender, and textual-rhetorical biases, see Goode (2005, Chap. 2).

course and the rise of consumer-oriented societies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, representative democracy became largely procedural, with the voting public choosing between competing candidates as they might choose between competing consumer products. Advertising, public relations, and subtle appeals to emotions and to personal fears and biases brought on what Habermas considered a period of re-feudalization in which the “public sphere” evaporated. The public passively consumed (like they consumed other mass-produced products) the legitimizing self-representations of economic and political elites.

My purpose in bringing up the Habermasian idea of the “public sphere” is not so much to testify to its historical accuracy or to its contemporary political implications as to note how the extent of public debate and discussion in particular periods may have a far-reaching effect on the functioning of a democratic society. More than that: the withering of public participation in deliberation on important issues of collective identity, policy and planning leaves power almost entirely in the hands of vested interests and technocratic “expertise” (on this issue, see also Scott, 1999; Mitchell, 2002).

What makes this heuristic model of the public sphere especially relevant to heritage interpretation is that a similar trajectory of public participation seems to be evident in the history of official heritage. From an initial stage of statist self-legitimation through the designation of national shrines and monuments to a presumably compliant citizenry (e.g. Dietler, 1994, among many other examples), came a period in which a non-governmental “public sphere” emerged, devoted to learned, reflective discussion of the ethics and philosophy of conservation and commemoration. The leading figures, including Ruskin, Viollet le Duc and somewhat later Riegl, were based in architecture and academia, rather than being direct spokesmen of the government (Jokilehto, 1986). Without unduly emphasizing this similarity of trajectory to that of Habermas, it might also be said that the following period was one of governmentalization – a kind of representative regime in which functionaries in government ministries and bureaucratic departments enacted the scholarly consensus through the fashioning of legislation and adopting certain criteria of value and conservation practices (Fowler, 1987; Delafons, 1997; Kohl, 1998). This can be seen especially in the twentieth century with the regularization of antiquities and monument services and the formulation of international charters and conventions that enshrined expert opinion as authoritative.

Lastly, and more recently, with the neoliberal wave of economic restructuring throughout the world, heritage has become an increasingly commodified resource. As “driver of development” it must increasingly lure visitors with extravagant site design and entertaining multimedia attractions. In most cases in the “Experience Economy” the heritage client does not contribute to the formulation of national memory or the determination of social significance except by passively choosing the sites to visit and thereby boosting their international visibility and revenue (Hewison, 1987; Lowenthal, 2002; Outka, 2009).

Why is this narrative of particular relevance to heritage interpretation? It is relevant because it traces the degree and extent of fundamental interaction between the public and “heritage,” not merely the effectiveness of information transfer to them. Indeed the most important element of Habermas’s analysis of the public sphere and his later classic discussion of communicative action in society is that the greater the sphere of discussion, debate and the possibility of consensus-building, the greater the legitimacy the collective will possess. And at a time when conflicts of heritage values were becoming increasingly evident – and they were being answered primarily by technologies of ever more powerful one-way communication and ever more superficial and passive consumption, it was clear that the basic theory and method of heritage interpretation inherited from Freeman Tilden needed to be thoroughly rethought.

Interpretation as process not product

The policy initiative that led to the formulation and eventual ratification of the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICIP, 2008) emerged at a time when digital technologies – particularly visualization and interactive multimedia applications – were becoming recognized as the cutting edge in interpretive outreach (Addison, 2001; Arnold et al., 2008; Kalay, 2008). It was also a time when the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS, 1999) and other policy documents such as the Council of Europe’s “Faro” Framework Convention (Council of Europe, 2005) were establishing the principle of public rights and responsibilities in the conservation and interpretation of heritage sites. These two elements – the increased and far more powerful dissemination of heritage information and the enhanced role of all stakeholders in creating as well as consuming it, created the conditions for a new approach to interpretation within wide sectors of the international heritage community.

Up to that time, the focus on public communication within ICOMOS and other international heritage organizations had been rather vaguely defined by a variety of terms including “presentation”, “interpretation”, “popularization”, “public education”, “outreach”, and even “vulgarization” (ICIP, 2008: Preamble) that all implicitly retained the idea of one-way communication with the non-expert public from a privileged source of authority. Increasingly, the worldwide neoliberal economic restructuring was requiring heritage places to become self-sufficient; the source of “authority” was becoming a demand for revenue generation through tourism. The new digital technologies all too often were used to attract visitors through novel and entertaining presentations, often of questionable value for reflecting upon or even learning about the past (e.g. Krösbacher and Ruddy, 2006). The result was an attempt to reach an international consensus on a new code of practice for interpretation at cultural heritage sites.

The ICOMOS Interpretation Charter attempted to facilitate wider collaboration between communities, interested individuals and heritage professionals in the plan-

ning, expression and continuing revision of interpretation – taking full cognizance of the new technologies as well as the new imperative of community accountability. Thus widened access, diversified information sources, inclusiveness in content, planning for sustainability and public participation in economic benefit were among the central principles of the Charter.⁴ Its aim was to replace the exclusive authority of the professional interpreter with a collaboration of stakeholders, including new people, new voices and new themes into the interpretive discourse. Professional interpreters would, of course, not disappear from the heritage landscape, but their emphasis would be primarily on the transfer of empirical information – or even the emotional “provocation” to elicit interest and support outlined by Tilden. It was rather the engagement of local and associated communities in interpretation as expressions of local and regional identity and empowerment as participants in collective reflection.

Innovative programmes framing heritage as a platform for contemporary debate and discussion had proved successful at contested sites and “sites of conscience” (Sevcenko, 2002; Malan, 2008), but here the aim was more general – to widen heritage interpretation of all sites from a transmission of specialized knowledge by specially trained interpreters to places of the (re)creation of collective memory in which many perspectives, subjectivities, identities and values could be freely exchanged. In our mediated, consumption-oriented era, sites of heritage have all too often become themed places of entertainment, with nostalgia as their chief commodity. And it was a kind of impossible restorative nostalgia, in which the visitor, in an unwitting acceptance of von Ranke’s historical essentialism, came to see the past “as it really was” (Rüsen, 1990). The Charter – and the paradigm of heritage interpretation it embodies – does not merely assume that the tangible and intangible inheritance from past generations has an unambiguous, self-evident significance. They are seen instead as “vessels of value” (Araoz, 2011) in which the values they contain sometimes clash, combine, evolve or are newly created through the experiences and perspectives of members of contemporary society.

⁴ The seven main principles of the ICOMOS Interpretation Charter are: Principle

- Access and Understanding;
- Information Sources;
- Attention to Setting and Context;
- Preservation of Authenticity;
- Planning for Sustainability;
- Concern for Inclusiveness;
- Importance of Research, Training, and Evaluation.

Interpretation as public discourse

The 2008 ratification of the ICOMOS Interpretation Charter was a step towards opening up interpretive practice; other important steps, in the form of community-based heritage projects have arisen in many parts of the world.⁵ Participation in heritage conservation and interpretation is increasingly seen as an aspect of civic engagement rather than (or as well as) continuing education or tourist development, especially where frameworks for long-term community planning of heritage sites are in place. There is a growing realization that heritage is not simply a top-down conservation effort, or a potentially lucrative resource to be exploited for short-term economic gain. Twenty-first-century heritage interpretation must be an informed and inclusive group activity, and expression of evolving community identity, facilitated by professionals and non-professionals alike. Moving from passive consumption of prepared presentations to enactment of identity and connection, this new form of heritage interpretation breaks through the confines of the tour and the site to become a form of discourse within the wider community. This collaborative approach neatly parallels the definition of the 2003 UNESCO Intangible Heritage Convention as seeing its substance being “transmitted from generation to generation ... constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provid[ing] them with a sense of identity and continuity” (UNESCO, 2003, Article 2.1). Heritage interpretation is becoming performative rather than strictly didactic; the lecture and the museum exhibit now stand on an equal footing with the historical reflections and ever-renewing performative self-representations of hybrid memory communities (Silberman, 2012).

This sense of identity and community cannot be imposed through outside instruction, nor can a body of value-neutral facts, dates and figures, conveyed by a specialized interpreter provoke and inspire visitors or local residents to see heritage sites as “vessels of value” and that are more than just statically conserved relics. Interpretation must abandon a purely curatorial perspective to recognize, in the words of the novelist William Faulkner, that “the past is never dead. It’s not even past” (Faulkner, 1959). Collaboration in the development, design and interpretation of a heritage site must incorporate values – almost always a range of differing and sometimes conflicting values – through which the connection of all members of the community to both past and future are expressed. Here indeed is the shortcoming of Tilden’s basic instrumental approach to interpretation, in which the elements highlighted by the interpreter are to be understood, appreciated and protected by the audience. What happens in the cases of conflicted understandings not of facts but of values or legitimate differences of perspective? This is why Habermas’s concept of communicative

⁵ For a wide sampling of case studies and theoretical developments in community-based heritage, see the special issue of the *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1–2.

action in the public sphere has enormous potential in reshaping the character of interpretation of heritage. It is a paradigm of interpretation as a shared – and ongoing – public activity, in which many voices are heard.

Much remains to be developed in this new approach to heritage interpretation as public discourse – not the least of which is the change from passive consumption to active creation, with heritage sites and museums becoming memory institutions, not *only* vacation attractions or weekend entertainment venues. This chapter has attempted to demonstrate that public discussion in the public sphere as a deliberative discourse of collective identities, social norms, and of the possibility of individual freedom *from* the weight of heritage – rather than following a guided tour – offers itself as a new interpretive paradigm.

Freeman Tilden's oft-quoted motto about understanding, appreciation and support for officialized commemoration (quoted above; 1957, p. 38) embodied the major challenge of interpretation throughout the ages: the commemoration of other eras, other forms and other cultures as static monuments resistant to the passage of time. Yet in our age of mass movements, social upheavals, diasporas, indigenous populations and globalizing economics, Tilden's motto needs to be replaced by a new one that reflects the ongoing paradigm shift: "Process, not product; collaboration, not 'expert-only' presentation; memory community, not heritage audience." This new paradigm of interpretation, based on Habermas's ideal of rational public discourse leading to social consensus and collective action, can offer a path forward towards renewing rational, non-dogmatic public discussion about how heritage sites can help us to understand how we arrived in our present often-conflicted social, economic and political situations – and where we should go from here.

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