Discourses of Development: Narratives of Cultural Heritage as an Economic Resource

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The importance of narrative communication in shaping the character and quality of tourist experiences has been demonstrated by large and varied body of research (for an overview, see Bruner 2005). To be clear from the outset, the story form that I here identify as “narrative” (a recognizable linear literary sequence that includes a beginning situation, a complication or crisis, struggle, reversal, and concluding transformation, cf. Campbell 1968, Propp 1968, Bruner 1991) has been identified as a crucial tool for facilitating and analyzing a wide range of specific factors in tourist activities, including the lure of self-discovery (Noy 2004), opportunities to address environmental concerns (L. M. Campbell 2002), place marketing and branding (Lichrou, O’Malley, and Patterson 2010), visitor motivations (Poria, Reichel, and Biran 2006), and the quality of visitor interactions (McCabe and Foster 2006). It has also been seen as an effective communication medium for a wide variety of interpretive forms, ranging from interpretation of indigenous cultures (Hall 2007), mobile digital
applications (Epstein and Vergani 2006), and tourism information systems (Gretzel et al. 2006). Narrative has also been identified as a crucial element of the archaeological and historical discourse (cf. White 1990, Landau 1993, Silberman 1995) on which most heritage tourism narratives are based. To tell an unfolding story—rather than merely recite a collection of facts or statistics—is to cultivate potentially powerful subjective emotional engagement, while simultaneously offering a subtle meta-narrative about the inevitability of certain kinds of cause and effect (Bruner 1991).

In the following pages I want to analyze a new class of narrative that has come to exert a significant impact on the public administration and presentation of cultural heritage. I refer to the narrative of “heritage as an economic resource” or “heritage as a driver of (sustainable) development” which has now become the leit-motif of international development agencies (cf. (Hawkins and Mann 2007), international organizations (Arezki, Cherif, and Piotrowski 2009), and a wide range of public and private stakeholders who have come to identify that narrative as an attractive model for action (Albernaz, Bandarin, and Hosagrahar 2011). Put most simply, the story suggests that a city or region’s current economic stagnation can be overcome by physically developing and widely promoting heritage sites or historic urban districts as attractive venues for large scale outside visitation. It is further implied, and sometimes explicitly promised, that the income derived from the expected flow of tourists will stimulate and develop the local economy. I would like to analyze this emerging narrative and highlight its main actors, villains, and storyline to distinguish
more clearly its presuppositions, value judgments, and promised goals. No less important is an assessment of its correspondence to real-world outcomes to discover if it represents a sustainable solution to economic underdevelopment or whether it is just, well, a fairy tale.

**The Anatomy and Morphology of the Tourist Tale**

Underlying the heritage-as-development narrative is the basic story of the tourist-adventurer, for the appeal of that familiar trope to paying visitors creates the demand for the kinds of heritage venue construction that is now currently linked with “sustainable development.” Its wide dissemination in TV documentaries, travel books, and trek and cruise ship advertising is a modern consumer variant of the universal literary structure that Joseph Campbell (1968) called the “monomyth.” Though the characters inevitably vary, the basic pattern remains the same:

"The mythological hero, setting forth from his common day hut or castle, is lured, carried away, or else voluntarily proceeds to the threshold of adventure. There he encounters a shadow presence that guards the passage. The hero may defeat or conciliate this power and go alive into the kingdom of the dark... Beyond the threshold, then, the hero journeys through a world of unfamiliar yet strangely intimate
forces, some of which severely threaten him (tests), some of which
give magical aid (helpers). When he arrives at the nadir of the mytho-
logical round, he undergoes a supreme ordeal and gains his reward...
or again-- if the powers have remained unfriendly to him-- his theft of
the boon he came to gain... The final work is that of return. If the
powers have blessed the hero, he now sets out under their protection
(eminssary); if not, he flees and is pursued (transformation flight, ob-
stacle flight). At the return threshold, the transcendental powers must
remain behind; the hero re-emerges from the kingdom of dread. The
boon he brings restores the world..." (J. Campbell 1968: 245-246)

Four elements are essential: 1.) a central or viewpoint character, the “Hero”; 2.) a
disruption to or departure from normal life; 3.) the exotic Realm of Darkness or Cha-
os where the hero’s adventure unfolds; 4.) the Challenge or Struggle against opposi-
tion, and 5.) the capture or theft of the “Boon” that restores the world. These are the
components of the basic European folktale, and even if Campbell was not correct in
calling it universal, it certainly encapsulates Western idea of travel, discovery, and
imperial quests. In its own more modest way, the tourist narrative places the traveler
in the position of the hero who departs from his or her daily routine to visit exotic
climes or cultures, struggle with unfamiliar language or customs, and return home
with a rich collection of stories, snapshots, and souvenirs. Dean MacCannell (1999)
characterized the tourist quest as a search for authenticity that he or she could not find in their workaday lives. Whether the destination is an exotic locale or the monuments of an ancient civilization, the fare-paying, hotel-staying, souvenir-buying tourist becomes something of an adventurer leaving his or her common day hut or castle and returning with memories and keepsakes that can—if not restore the world—at least demonstrate to the folks back home that the tourist had escaped the daily grind for at least a little while.

Within the macro-narrative of the tourist adventure, an embodied sequence of movement reproduces the same adventure motif. In the visitor’s carefully programmed and directed progress from the car park, through the ticket booth and attraction entrance, along the designated paths of novel exhibits, sights, and interpretations, finally reaching the cafeteria and gift shop, the visitor emerges back into the “normality” of the car park again. It is an adventure story read with the feet and experienced with the sensations of the body (Silberman 2007) that offers the same sense of virtual adventure: experiencing the “authentic” through a personal passage through the physical setting of a carefully planned and managed natural or cultural heritage site. Indeed, the visitor’s everyday identity can sometimes be changed or viewed from another perspective in the course of the heritage journey/experience. Whether through immersive virtual reality environments in which the visitor experiences the sights and sounds of distant epochs or battles (Tost and Economou 2009) or accepts the virtual identity of an hero or victim in an historical narrative (Greeff
and Lalioti 2001, Liss 1993) a visit to a recently designed and electronically equipped heritage site is increasingly focused on some form of personal enrichment or transformation, however temporary or fleeting it may be (Breathnach 2006).

Thus by the turn of the 21st century, the social meaning of the cultural heritage tourist experience is composed of several distinct and overlapping narratives that all convey the same message: 1.) authenticity is to be found elsewhere than home and the present; 2.) the value of the past is as a coherent and well-constructed story, and 3.) it requires personal participation in an experience/adventure that does not come for free. Yet far from offering a permanent connection with useful, sources of serious, continuing historical reflection, it is often the product of artifice and illusion (Silberman 2004). Ironically, the same could be said of the new hyper-narrative of “heritage as an economic resource.”

**Heritage and Development: From Opponents to Allies**

It might once have seemed strange that professionally curated cultural heritage would ever be widely seen by both academics and regional planners as an exploitable economic resource, for the idea of “conservation” and the goal of “development” make an unlikely, not to say oxymoronic, pair. Indeed heritage preservation and conservation groups and development organizations have been longtime rivals, often seeing Past and Future in starkly contrasting terms. Conservationists zealously pro-
ected the idea of exemplary monuments of historic cultures and did everything it could to prevent their destruction or alteration by the relentless forces of Modernity. As stated most recently by former ICOMOS president Michael Petzet (2009: 10), “instead of an a priori ‘tolerance for change’ based on whatever standards… we should stick to our fundamental principles and fight for cultural heritage in a dramatically changing world.” Developers, on the other hand, often saw the material remains of ancient and traditional cultures of the past as burdens or mere obstacles, especially if they interfered with urban investment or construction plans (for example, Gotham 2001, Fang and Zhang 2003). But the devastating effects of social dislocation (Fullilove 2005), the growing appeal of gentrification (Smith 1979), and “heritage themed” shopping environments (Eisinger 2000) gave the idea of scrubbed historic facades and cobblestone streets a higher value than ever before.

Indeed the World Bank, in particular, slowly began to change its policy toward cultural heritage. From an initial passive attitude of “do no harm” (i.e. avoidance or diversion of roads and other infrastructural projects from conspicuous historical and archaeological monuments), the Bank began to change its policy in its 1999 Framework For Action, encouraging investment and infrastructural improvement of built heritage and historic urban centers in some of its poorest borrowing states (Serageldin and Martin-Brown 1999). The spectacularly successful 1997 opening of the new Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain—though a cultural institution, rather than cultural heritage—had raised expectations about the effect cultural tourism
could have on the economy of regions long in post-industrial decline (Baniotopoulou 2001). And what had occurred in Bilbao, it was believed, could surely happen in other places. And thus with the recognition that cultural attractions and historic urban landscapes gentrified into expensive vacation homes and exotic high-end markets, a new narrative was born.

But this time the narrative’s hero was not an adventurer or defender of heritage against the forces of modernity, but far-sighted political leaders whose adventure was risking their political prestige (not to mention their nations’ credit) in the realm of cultural heritage. For as the World Bank and a growing number of development agencies defined it:

“The patrimony represents a vast collection of cultural assets, but these assets also have a huge economic value. Markets only imperfectly recognize this economic value because of insufficient information and inadequate pricing mechanisms. Historically, the economic value of the patrimony’s endowments has been given much less attention than its cultural significance. Largely because of this limited recognition, policy makers and planners in developing countries have been little concerned, and little able, to activate and harvest the economic value of their country’s patrimony. Bank policy has come to unambiguously recognize this economic value. It holds that the patrimony can be-
come an auxiliary engine for generating economic growth and develop-
ment.” (Cernea 2001:33)

The past, in its material, money-making form, had become the treasure for the politi-
cal leader bold enough to grasp this apparent opportunity. For deindustrialized, de-
agriculturalized cities and regions, the existential crisis was their hopelessness; the
solution lay in investing in the past to build a better future, even at the cost of selling
their cultural souls. A new trans-national industry grew up to support the so-called
“harvesting” of the economic value of heritage resources (Peacock and Rizzo 2008),
their (often outsourced) management (Palumbo 2006), and their design and market-
ing (Leighton 2006). Borrowing concepts from theme parks and interactive muse-
ums, site planners now also began to utilize digital applications, 3D reconstructions,
and Virtual Reality experiences with a wide enough range of vivid images and im-
pressions to satisfy almost every visitor’s taste. So like bauxite, coal, or rainforest
hardwoods, the material remains of the past were seen as an economic resource.
What this amounted to—at least in the new narrative—was the creation of lucrative,
job-creating leisure time entertainment, marketed with the same modes of tour book-
ing, entrance fees, restaurants, gift shops, and overnight accommodations as other
packaged visits of the modern mass tourist industry.

Though they were at first resistant to the idea of heritage as commerce, many
of the academics and working professionals of the heritage conservations sector
eventually were persuaded to go along. Although the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention warned of “serious and specific dangers” to the world’s cultural heritage due to, among other causes, “large-scale public or private projects or rapid urban or tourist development projects” (UNESCO 1972: article 11.4) and in its preamble, the 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity bemoaned the threat to heritage in “a world that is increasingly subject to the forces of globalization and homogenization” (Larsen 1994), hard economic realities played their own role. Significant budget cuts to monuments and antiquities services in an age of neoliberal restructuring, left the cultural heritage sector ravaged and in desperate need of alternative sources of support (Yúdice 2003). And so Heritage and Development—longtime rivals—now wove together a story about how heritage could be useful—about how development and tradition could create a productive synergy.

The Memorandum of Understanding concluded between UNESCO and the World Bank tells the whole story (UNESCO and World Bank 2011). After decades of on-and-off discussion of conflicts and common interests, the world’s most influential cultural heritage body and the world’s most powerful economic development agency openly acknowledged how entwined their respective missions had become. “By joining forces, UNESCO and the World Bank can provide very positive input for the improvement of aid effectiveness, and make the most of culture as a motor for social development and poverty alleviation, through employment and job creation. We believe also we can give impetus and concrete follow up to the recent reso-
lution of the United Nations General Assembly which underlined the links between culture and development,” said Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO at the signing ceremony (UNESCO Media Services 2011). In agreeing to collaborate on a series of global initiatives, the two organizations officially endorsed the new narrative, which was further validated later that year by the theme of the ICOMOS 17th General Assembly (held at UNESCO headquarters in Paris): “Heritage as a Driver of Development” (International Council on Monuments and Sites 2011).

The shared story now told to governments, investors, and visitors to rehabilitated historic urban areas and heritage sites is a narrative in which the remains of the past are seen as a path to economic rebirth for developing nations and regions whose economies and societies are in crisis, or at the very least in serious, disruptive decline. The World Bank, as usual, expressed the new narrative succinctly on the “Cultural Heritage and Sustainable Development” section of its vast website:

“Culture is a resource for economic and social development. Poor communities helped in recognizing and preserving their cultural assets are provided with new economic opportunities and enabled to build development on their diverse social, cultural, and physical background. The possibility to generate income from cultural assets creates employment, reduces poverty, stimulates enterprise development by the poor, fosters private investment, and generates resources
for environmental and cultural conservation. From a human and social perspective, the appreciation of their own cultural patrimony brings to poor communities awareness in their identity. Awareness boosts confidence; it’s an input for social mobilization and empowerment, promotes inclusion, and complements capacity building and good governance strategies.” (World Bank n.d.)

But this and all the other related scenarios were filled with assertions—hopeful and positive, certainly—but nevertheless rather vague and empirically unverified. The very redefinition of cultural heritage as an economic resource represents a particular vision of development, in which the remains of the past and the products and services derived from it can be commodified while the culture of commodification remains unquestioned and unseen. And yet narratives have their own motivating power, even in a purely business environment (Alvarez and Merchán 1992). And so the global investment in cultural heritage tourism continues. But on purely economic, balance-sheet terms, does the fable often come true?

The Empire’s New Clothes?

For those observers who had neither faith nor financial interest in the “heritage as economic resource” story, things were not exactly what they were promised to be.
Hard statistics on the economic performance of many heritage development projects were hard to come by, and the various methods of calculating the economic valuation of cultural heritage were often contradictory and in dispute (De la Torre 2002; Bowitz and Ibenholt 2009). Yet encouraged by the tautologically supportive promotional “how-to” guides by international organizations and academics who enthusiastically supported the new story (e.g. Arezki, Cherif, and Piotrowski 2009), (Chhabra 2009); du Cros 2001; McKercher et al. 2002), municipal, regional, and national governments borrowed and invested significant sums to make the infrastructural and management improvements to enter the heritage tourism market, often with the additional expense and effort of nominating sites for the World Heritage List or the various “Cultural Capitals” competitions that were held throughout the world. 

Ironically, the development of cultural heritage sites, built to the standards of access, visitor facilities, and interpretation required to attract international tourism, was part of a seemingly unstoppable process of modernization in every region and country it occurred. Not only did it almost always require the removal and transfer of resident businesses and populations, but in “developing” the heritage value through redesign and place-branding, it effectively erased the painful memories of economic decline and abandonment that had actually preserved the old buildings of the historic urban core. And indeed despite all the talk of sustainability, it became clear that investments in heritage had a finite life-span: after an initial period of publicity and fanfare, the level of tourism dropped far below the revenue required to re-
coup the investment costs (Russo 2002). Sometimes even the initial revenue failed to justify the initial outlay, as was seen in Sophia Labadi’s enlightening, if bleak study of the socio-economic impacts of “regenerated” heritage sites in Europe (2008) where the meager or non-existent economic regeneration diverged sharply from the widely accepted narrative.

Even in the relatively few sites where the income was enormous, the benefit was rarely seen to be shared equally. Whether the revenue was controlled or mis-managed by the central government, leaving little in the way of trickle-down economic stimulation (Zan and Lusiani 2011) or by international travel firms and cruise lines (Slyomovics 1995; Weaver 2005), leaving little leakage of tourist cash into the local economy, the hidden costs of borrowing, investment credits, and increased public services were seldom taken into account. More troubling still was the social effect, when a community’s heritage was turned into an industry. When revenue generation becomes a primary objective of urban development, and outside visitors the target, alienation of the local population and mistrust of the motives for investment can result (Eisinger 2000). More subtly and insidiously, the marketing of heritage can blur the line between modern commercial interests and the collective past (see Wilson 2009 for an outlandish example from northeastern China).

The effect of these multiplying critiques of the simple equation of heritage with economic development can be seen as coalescing into something of a counter-narrative, though this one has no hero, only villains, victims, and dupes (e.g. Liu
2003; Lansing and Vries 2006; Briedenhann and Wickens 2004; Mitchell 2002: Chapter 6 "Heritage and Violence"). In this counter narrative an often-idealized local community is victimized by metropolitan consultants and developers who seek to extract profits from commodified heritage. The result is a monetary gain (even if only temporary for the developers) and a loss—of property, dignity, and ultimately cultural integrity for the local community that is forced out and/or forced to play an increasingly caricatured role for the sake of the heritage display (Macleod 2006).

Yet this counter-narrative offers no solution, no hope to possibility of revitalizing and energizing the role of heritage and local tradition in a rapidly globalizing world. Unlike the story it responds to, there is no treasure or magic elixir to be found at the end of the quest.

**Conclusion: Toward a Story without an End**

So what are we to do with the conflicting narratives about heritage as economic resource that are so diametrically opposed? They call for opposite actions; each is a zero-sum tale. One encourages profit-driven excess and commodification while the other sees no practical or feasible economic alternative to stagnation and decay. The truth—if we can use such a word when speaking of narrative constructions—obviously lies somewhere in between. For history’s tangible and intangible traces are not objects with unequivocal meaning; they are rather to be seen as “vessels of
value” (Araoz 2011), whose social context determines how they best should be used.
In some cases, heritage monuments can indeed serve as lucrative tourist attractions,
so long as the displacement or disruption of the lives of the many does not outweigh
the economic benefit of the few (Miura 2005). Sometimes heritage sites can better
be “sites of conscience” for serious historical reflection, rather than for snapshots and
souvenirs (Sevcenko 2010). Other sites—sacred places and houses of worship—
should perhaps not be declared official heritage sites at all (Zimmerman 2007). Each
community has its own range of narrative connections to elements of the historic
landscape; no single use or development method can possibly be appropriate for all.
Questions about the value and usefulness of cultural heritage for insiders and outsid-
ers, for visitors and locals, transcend specific economic and ideological considera-
tions, no matter how persuasive the particular narrative.

Perhaps it is the power of narrative itself as a means of public discourse and
discussion that can animate a more inclusive connection to the past. Narrative is
“powerful speech”; it is the fabric of culture (Niles 2010)—the closest thing we can
ever have to a specific collective memory. It is also a call to action, that conveys vi-
sions of disruption, change, and struggle that cultural heritage itself represents. Yet
the narratives and anti-narratives of “heritage as an economic resource” both look
down from on high, from an expert’s perspective, concerned primarily with the her-
itage objects, largely ignoring individual interpretive agency. All must share in the
power to weave creative, reflective narratives about the impact of the past on the pre-
sent. For the right of all stakeholders—insiders, outsiders, tourists, entrepreneurs, and local communities, to contribute their own narrative visions at every stage of public heritage planning, conservation, and presentation—not merely accept “authoritative” versions—may be the greatest value of cultural heritage in the 21st century.
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