Safeguarding Cultural Heritage Sites
The Dynamics of Interpretation and the Contribution of Effective Design

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Abstract. Most cultural heritage sites present their visitors with meaningful interpretation of place and objects on display. Visitors are engaged and a range of objectives fulfilled. For some sites interpretative provision is limited and not so successful, there are degrees of authenticity and guidance which do not provide visitors with a stimulating and enjoyable experience. The challenge is to find ways of engaging visitors not only to the value and significance of a site but also to raise awareness of its vulnerability. This paper will consider how we can effectively transfer the spirit of place to cultural heritage sites using the dynamics of effective interpretation and design (including the use of new technology). Using examples drawn from the UK, including the new Culloden Visitor Centre in Scotland, the discussion centres around the concept that effective interpretation safeguards cultural heritage sites and gives meaning to place, fully engages its visitors and provides a context for ownership, personal experiences and memories.

It is widely recognised that the preservation and conservation of heritage assets is 'not by itself sufficient to secure a future for the past' and 'hearts and minds have to be won to the cause' (Tabraham 2006). Many establishments have focused on the need to educate visitors and to protect and preserve resources, but 21st century pressures demand an holistic approach with a whole range of interpretive initiatives developed with a special focus on the needs of visitors. Increasingly visitors 'are no

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longer willing to be passive recipients of wisdom from on high, but want to participate, to question, to take part as equals, and to receive as high a standard of service as would be offered at any other type of leisure site' (Black, 2005).

The rapid escalation in mass tourism globally to heritage sites, museums, historic landscapes and places of architectural interest has led to the development of ever more challenging interpretive strategies to provide a better visitor experience. The unique nature of such places can be transformed by good interpretation and design. Effective interpretive planning not only informs, entertains and promotes heritage assets to visitors but also encourages awareness and need for effective partnerships; thus balancing the needs of visitors, with that of protection, conservation and the interests of the strategic goals and the economic and social well-being of the community in which the cultural heritage sites are located.

The Evolution of Interpretation

Black (2005, p179 - 210) and others such as Brochu and Merriman (2002) ably describe the origins of interpretation as both an old tradition and a new science and in particular acknowledge the theory and guiding principles of interpretation developed by Freeman Tilden over 50 years ago for the National Park Service in the USA (Tilden, 1957). Tilden defined interpretation as, 'An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information'(Tilden, 1957, p9). He recognised that 'Interpretation is an art' and that, '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'. (Tilden, 1957. p 9). Thus the 'art' of interpretation is a thought provoking approach beyond the obvious interpretive panels and trails to Tilden's central thesis 'through interpretation, understanding; through understanding appreciation; through appreciation, protection.'

Over the last three decades or so the field has been awash with varied perspectives and definitions of interpretation which in the main relate to those developed by Tilden. The American Association of Museums defined interpretation in their National Project as 'a dynamic process of communication between the museum and the audience' (AAM. 1999, p81). Interpretation 'denotes the totality of activity, reflection, research, and creativity stimulated by a cultural heritage site.

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The input and involvement of visitors, local and associated community groups and other stakeholders... is essential to interpretation' (Siberman 2008). Thus effective interpretation has become crucial as a vehicle for visitors to engage with the evidence presented from the past.

Designing interpretation has become a profession, with leading experts in the field joining in-house planning teams as part of a consultative process. Design consultancies offer a range of interpretive provision for heritage sites, visitor centres and museums and it is recognised that good design plays an important role in the success of a project.

Contemporary Visitors

A central issue for design is that of understanding the nature of your audience. Uzzell makes the important point that 'there is no such body as the general public. The so-called general public is made up of different audiences with different needs and different expectations' (1994). Research has shown that contemporary visitors are not passive but active participants during their visit and indeed 'bring a multiplicity of interpretations to the reading of displays' Goulding (2000). Thus the dynamics of good interpretive practice are both challenging and complex as designers strive to accommodate a diverse audience base and having to meet the goals of management and planning.

Contemporary Approaches to Interpretation

Increasingly, strategies for interpretation in cultural heritage sites include a plethora of new technology. Bath (2006) discusses the usefulness of new technology and the opportunities it opens up for the heritage sector. Satellite data, GPS systems, audio tours, portable PC's and off site interpretive technologies such as digital technology and multimedia provide an immense range of possibilities (Bath 2006). Virtual reality for delicate heritage sites such as Stonehenge, a World Heritage Site is expected to provide the key to safeguarding, conserving and protecting fragile sites from their many visitors.

Examples drawn from Current Practice
1) Culloden Visitor Centre, National Trust, Scotland

The newly opened £9million Visitor Centre at Culloden, near Inverness in Scotland, illustrates a site that has benefited from effective 21st

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century interpretation and design. The battle of Culloden was fought here in 1746, thus it is a unique destination and part of the rich cultural history of Scotland. The National Trust for Scotland manages the site, having acquired it in the 1930's when it was covered with woodland. The site was restored as it was on the day of battle and it remains one of leading tourist attractions of the Scottish Highlands.

There has always been a misunderstanding and myth that the battle was fought between the Scots and English and the NT were keen that visitors should leave with a better understanding of the history and of the sensitivity of the site. Not only is this a battlefield site, but also a mass grave, and interpretive signs or information points would be inappropriate.

Fig 1: Culloden Battle Site

A range of new technology including GPS (Global Positioning System) has been used effectively to deliver the context of the battle site with innovative interpretation. Visitors carry a hand-held device with GPS and multi-language dialogue triggered automatically as they explore the site at their own pace and provides all the relevant audio, visual information and site orientation. The moorland site remains untouched except for red and blue flags showing the battle lines and a few unmarked stones. (See fig 1)

An interpretive exhibition in the main visitor centre designed by the Ralph Applebaum Design Consultancy, uses the accounts of characters involved in the battle in an interactive display with 'hypersonic' sound stations and based on the latest historical and archaeological evidence. Sound includes the Gaelic language with original words, song and music spoken at the time of battle (website). Included in the Exhibition's battle zone is an 'immersion theatre' where visitors experience the battle itself in a graphic four minute account, projected 360° around the walls. There is a display of weapons and artefacts found on the battlefield. Visitors are directed to the roof of the building in order to see the whole field of battle.

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The Visitor Centre building itself has been designed sympathetically, is low profile and sensitive to the landscape. It achieves a respect for the site. (see website http://www.nts.org.uk/Culloden/PPF/VisitorCentre/). It was designed by Gareth Hoskins Architects as a result of an international design competition held by the National Trust for Scotland in 2004. (Fig 2) (Further Images of the building can be accessed on http://www.e-architect.co.uk/scotland/culloden_battlefield.htm.)

Fig 2 Culloden Visitor Centre (taken from website)

The building, which is clad in local larch wood, was designed for environmental sustainability and takes advantage of natural daylight. It is heated by a woodchip burning biomass boiler system, supplied from local forestry sources. (website)

2) Urquhart Castle, Scotland

Managed by Historic Scotland, the castle stands on the north shore of Loch Ness. (See Fig 3) The site has at least 4000 years of associated history, with earliest written records of a castle dating from the 1200's. Originally a Norman Castle its ruins dates from 1692 when it was blown up by the Government of the time to stop it being used as a Jacobite base.

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Fig 3: Urquhart Castle, Scotland

A new Visitor Centre was opened in 2002. This has been sensitively built into the hillside and below the main road. (See Fig 4).

Fig 4: Urquhart Castle Visitor Centre, Scotland

Here there is an excellent audio-visual theatre which sets the scene and provides visitors with a context of the history of the castle (Fig 5) as well as models of what the castle might have looked like in its former days. There are a number of excellent interpretation information points across the site.

Fig 5 View from theatre in Visitor Centre

Discussion

Each of these examples illustrate the challenge of providing good interpretation via a range of a strategies. Both have a visitor centre that is sympathetic to the site and include innovative interpretation which plays an important role in the visitor experience. Each motivates the visitor to learn more and to focus on gaining an understanding of the comprehensive nature of its history and context and fragility of the site itself.

If we reflect on the assumption that effective interpretation safeguards cultural heritage sites, gives meaning to place, and provides a context for pride, ownership, personal experiences and memories then interpreters also must take into account what visitors themselves bring and their own understanding of a place. In these particular examples

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described above (and there were many that could have been used in support of this paper) the notion of 'Scottishness' and of Scotland may well be embedded from familiar icons in the consciousness of the audience who visit; the battlefield, the castle, the romantic ruin. In terms of battlefield sites in particular, there is a valid argument that as time progresses, 'places become less to do with remembrance and more to do with day-trip excursion, less of a memorial and more of a tourist attraction. Places move from being a memory to being an historical record and artefact' (Uzzell 1998 p14).

The central element of focused and appropriate interpretation at historic sites is to see audiences as 'partners in a joint enterprise' (Black 2005) so that visitors are 'in the right frame-of-mind on site so that they wish to engage with the collections and exhibitions...(and) with quality interpretation, learning provision and displays' (Black 2005). Interpretation has to encompass a whole range of techniques to ensure the balance of 'aesthetic and specialist values with an improved and rewarding visitor experience' (Taylor 2006).

New technology is having a major impact in terms of designed experiences but there are critics and other less expensive methods can be as appropriate especially if budgets are tight. Silberman describes 'a convergence of goals' in the 21st century as new technology 'transforms the process of re-creating and understanding the past' so that the many innovative multimedia applications we find globally at cultural heritage sites and visited by a multiplicity of audiences has made the past a resource to be conjured with in 'an ever-present virtual reality that is simultaneously more real and more virtual than ever before' (Silberman, 2006).

A new generation of visitors has emerged in the 21st century with very different demands including the need for a high quality and entertaining 'experience'. In the examples discussed in this paper, each has successfully embraced a range of interpretive media in which to give meaning to place, understanding and appreciation. This in turn following Tilden's philosophy will support protection. There is increased competition from other leisure attractions and cultural heritage sites must embrace the range of opportunities that effective interpretation and design will offer if we are to give meaning to place and to safeguard heritage assets for future generations.

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