

## THE STORIES WE TELL ABOUT PLACES (AND HOW THEY DEFINE THE ECONOMIC TRAJECTORY OF COMMUNITIES)

*The value of authentic heritage and rooted identity in the global competition for talent, tourism and trade*

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**Abstract.** This paper builds on seminal research we have undertaken on World Heritage Sites. (See our report *World Heritage Status: Is there opportunity for economic gain?* 2009) It explores a key theme that emerged from that research – of heritage being increasingly identified as a way of cities and regions differentiating themselves from each other as a key element of their economic development. It highlights how dynamic cities and regions utilize authentic heritage to create a narrative that gives them a distinct ‘sense of place’ that gives a comparative advantage in terms of attracting and retaining human talent, higher value tourism, trade and inward investment. The paper concludes by highlighting the need to create defining narratives for historic communities that contain the flexibility required for future social and economic development.

### 1. Introduction

Earlier this year I watched a TED film about the much-admired designer Stefan Seigmeister<sup>1</sup>. It was about how he had written down in his diary the 10 things he had learnt in his life so far and how this list had become the basis for a series of projects. At first I thought it was a dumb idea, and then the idea stalked me until I succumbed to an internal voice that said,

**'Why don't you reduce everything you have learnt about heritage and economics to ten simple lessons?'**

It wasn't an original idea, but I took up the challenge. But, to steal a joke from Clemenceau, I found that whilst God and Stefan Seigmeister might only require 10 lessons, I'm more like Woodrow Wilson. I struggle to get mine down to less than 14. It might be that I have more to say than God and Stefan, but I doubt it. The truth is that reducing what you know and have learnt to its very essence produces surprising results. The list doesn't look like you think it is going to. My list surprised me, because one lesson rose to the top and wouldn't go away however many times I rewrote the list<sup>2</sup>. The lesson that came out on top was

**The stories we tell about places really matter (and often shape the economic trajectory of communities)**

I spend my professional life working with historic communities that want to be more effective economically,

socially or environmentally. But long ago I realized that the differing economic performance of different places or organisations is only partially explained by ‘hard’ physical infrastructure. Anyone who doubts this should look at the history of Apple and the influence of a man and his ideas, Steve Jobs – and ask themselves whether Apple is so successful because of its hard infrastructure or because of ideas. Curiously, despite this, economic development programmes across much of the world are still fixated by hard infrastructure and rather dismissive of ideas and stories. And as such love the ‘new’ and struggle to understand the ‘old’.

<sup>1</sup> The film can be watched at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2OUFCyKr-t0>, and the book to accompany it is interesting as well <http://www.amazon.com/Things-have-learned-life-far/dp/0810995298>

<sup>2</sup> Some of the other lessons of relevance to this paper emerge below, others will be saved for another paper on another day, we don't want to go and tell the world everything we think we know in one short paper, do we?

As a student of economic history I studied the work of sociologists like Max Weber on the 'protestant work ethic' as a driver of economic development; of economic historians like David Landes who highlighted in his magisterial *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations* how historically cultures emerged in some nations that were detrimental to their future economic development\*, and; Joel Mokyr who highlighted the importance of 'increases in the stock of human knowledge, which includes technological progress...as well as changes in institutions'\*\*. More recently I read the great urbanist Jane Jacobs who made a very simple but brilliant observation that new ideas are formed by combing old ideas (the implication being that places where old ideas exist are critical ingredients and breeding grounds for the future)\*\*\*. But knowing the theory is one thing; over the past decade I have seen with my own eyes how powerful ideas and stories can be in the evolution of different communities, particularly below the state level in cities, regions, sites, or at institutional level. This paper seeks to explain some of what I have experienced and tries to stimulate a discussion about how we can better measure, test, and understand these mysterious and difficult to define narratives (and use this knowledge to best effect in the future).

I believe there is an intellectual element in the development of communities that we might, in the name of simplicity, call the stories people tell about those places. Shared narratives about places can define both what they are now, but also what they can be in the future<sup>A</sup>. Why some cities, regions, landscapes, or smaller communities and sites become dynamic and effective and others stagnate is at least in part driven by ideas and perceptions. Some of the sites where we work suffer from weak, undefined or negative self-perceptions (or to be more accurate the people working in many communities have a perception of their place being mediocre or second-rate). These perceptions are rarely written down or openly spoken about so are difficult to measure or record. But they exist like a shadow over certain places and can affect motivation, aspiration levels, policies affecting various issues, fundraising effectiveness and even the quality of people who work in different places.

Let me give you an example of how these narratives work in practice. I recently wrote a report for a local authority in which I wanted to show them what could be done in their community if they learnt from best practice around the world, so I showed them some great international examples. When I next met with the client I was told it would be better if I took out the international best practice examples and replaced them with something more 'local' and 'achievable'. The perception of place for this community was so mediocre that thinking about doing things in a 'world-class' manner was too fantastical to be

considered seriously. The stakeholders had internalized a narrative of this place that perpetuated failure or mediocrity, and the opportunity to change this was dismissed in favour of the safer more familiar narrative. There are a thousand ways in which some places fail to become what they could be, and many of these ways are chosen by decision makers because it is easier to carry on down the same path than to imagine a place as better than you think it is. Lack of belief and conviction seriously handicaps many places.

I have been researching for the best part of a decade how these stories emerge, what ingredients go into them, and the effects of such narratives on the people who live in places that become defined in this way, and this paper presents some emerging themes for discussion.

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\* His key example was what Carlo Cipolla called "The prevalent hidalgo mentality" in Spain after the discovery of the Americas and the wealth of natural resources which flowed back to Spain. This, he argued, allowed the Spanish to indulge themselves with genteel living whilst the poorer Northern Europeans developed habits of trading and industry that would later determine their success. In other words hard factors and ideas were symbiotic and extremely powerful. *Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, Little Brown (1998) pp. 173

\*\* Mokyr was primarily focused on technological change as a determinant in economic growth, but his mentioning the role of ideas and institutions is valuable for our purposes. *The Lever of Riches: technological creativity and economic progress*, Oxford University Press (1990), pp.4-7

\*\*\* Jane Jacobs quoted in *Triumph of the City*, Edward Glaeser, Macmillan (2011) pp. 33

<sup>A</sup> We are necessarily vague in this paper about who shares these collective narratives—the evolution of these ideas often from a few people initially to being staples of public opinion is a matter requiring more research.

## 2. Heritage as a defining ingredient in placemaking

Since 2008 we have undertaken analysis of hundreds of UNESCO World Heritage Sites to try and identify best practice in terms of heritage-led economic development. That research has resulted in analysis that can be read in conjunction with this paper, and doesn't need to be repeated at length here\*. Suffice to say that we came to the conclusion that motivations for securing the UNESCO designation were critical determinants of what places did with the designation. A minority of progressive sites around the world found in the designation and their 'outstanding universal value' a defining idea and narrative with which to drive their social and economic development.

Our previous work revealed that becoming a World Heritage Site was often a powerfully beneficial process because it focused stakeholder's attention on the identity of places. It appears that for a significant minority of sites becoming a WHS creates a situation whereby the local stakeholders collectively ask themselves the critical question, 'Why is our place unique, special and globally important?'

Answering this question is the basis of effective tourism marketing, the key to attracting inward investment or relocation of businesses, often the key to adding value to commercial products and creating prouder more dynamic communities that are more confident to engage with the rest of the world. Though the above question is a simple one many communities would find it very difficult to answer it convincingly or in terms that anyone outside their region would understand. Having cultural or natural heritage that is recognised as being of global importance appears to help some places find a more coherent and authentic identity. But perhaps even more importantly, WHS status in dynamic sites also seems to lead to better communication of this value through a clear narrative to residents and visitors that works. If one looks at the tourism marketing or inward investment information for Bordeaux, Bamberg, Regensburg or Laponia, one is effectively being told that these places are 'exceptional', not just as historical artefacts but as living breathing places where people do business and live their lives. The evidence we analysed from tourism destinations like Bordeaux and Bamberg suggests this kind of high-value heritage narrative is effective\*\*. This is Jane Jacob's idea in practice: the future being created out of the existence of the past.

The best practice WHSs we identified have found themselves at the cutting edge of a world movement which seeks to focus the economic development of places on their uniqueness, their authenticity, their distinct sense

of place, and the depth of their identity and culture. And to engage with the rest of the world from a position of confidence, selling distinct products and services at added value based upon their provenance. Achieving these aspirations is not easy or achieved without considerable investment - successful places invest heavily in achieving this. It appears that WHS status and the catalyst it provides can play a role in this movement to high quality and distinctiveness (in a range of different ways each of the detailed case studies we undertook in our previous report revealed this effect). Finally, places that have gone through this process of self-discovery and learning to communicate this message to others often find themselves with a new or improved identity and a sense of mission. In other words, we found dynamic communities that had found in their designated heritage the ingredients from which to create a dynamic contemporary identity.

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\*See the author's previous work: World Heritage Status: Is there opportunity for economic gain, Rebanks Consulting and Trends Business Research on behalf of the Lake District World Heritage Project (2009), available at <http://rebanksconsultingltd.com/resources/WHSTheEconomicGainFinalReport.pdf> or The Price of Lemons – World Heritage and economic development, Interview with James Rebanks, World Heritage Review – Sustainable Tourism Issue, No 58 (November 2010) – available at <http://www.pfdheritage.com/wh58/index.html?pageNumber=79>. Thanks also to the North by North West partnership for permission to use material from their Why Art Works report – see [http://rebanksconsultingltd.com/resources/why\\_art\\_works\\_screed.pdf](http://rebanksconsultingltd.com/resources/why_art_works_screed.pdf)

\*\* See data presented in World Heritage Status: Is there opportunity for economic gain? 2009

### 3. Why do 'soft' factors like perceptions matter?

Research undertaken by the Communications Group Plc. has shown that as more and more cities and regions meet the basic 'hard' criteria for investment and relocation decisions, inward investors and re-locaters are increasingly influenced by 'soft' or 'quality of life' factors\*. Their seminal research was based upon survey work of 102 members of YouGov's Think-tank panel of business leaders, and 22 senior executives of companies that employed over 500,000 individuals in up to 140 countries. The study went on to state that successful destinations needed to have a clear and authentic identity that set them apart from other competing places. Too many places are 'clone towns', indistinguishable from each other and with few 'attractors' in the form of iconic architecture, heritage, cultural facilities, and events\*\*. The Communications Group research revealed that 65% of inward investment decision makers were 'finding it increasingly difficult to differentiate between investment locations; of these 92% said that as a result, the image and profile of a location is becoming more and more influential in their decision making'. 60% of interviewees stated that soft factors like architecture and culture have become more important in the past 5-10 years.

The most successful destinations marry the softer factors with the hard to create images and perceptions of a place where it is fun and interesting to live, work and play. It is worth looking for a moment at how the decision makers in the Communications Group study rated the different factors for business 'destinations' (those which might be provided or enhanced by heritage have been made bold),

Strong economy - 68%  
**Agreeable climate and environment – 67%**  
 Friendly local people – 66%  
**Strong tradition in culture/arts – 60%**  
**Widely available entertainment/leisure – 60%**  
 Skills base/educated workforce – 58%  
**Exceptional architecture – 50%**  
 Good public services – 46%  
 Attractive labour legislation -32%  
 Strong currency – 30%  
 Attractive employer legislation – 30%  
 Affordable housing – 28%  
 Sporting excellence – 26%  
 Celebrities in music, film and fashion – 22%  
 Other - 6%

These findings are rather startling, because they suggest that culture, including heritage, is not a luxury item but a fundamental in how places attract talent, trade and tourism. Having a strong reputation for culture and the arts ranked higher than public services or affordable housing. The key

message is that if you can compete in terms of infrastructure then a great deal comes down to softer factors.

It is well evidenced that high value knowledge workers require the right 'hard' infrastructure (buildings, roads, railways, broadband, etc.) and access to markets, but, crucially, once a destination has these 'hard' elements they also demand certain 'softer' items. And having a dynamic and interesting cultural life, which includes elements like a distinct historic identity or high quality environment, is a key part of this. Fascinatingly, even sectors that would seem to have no connection to culture or heritage make inward investment decisions based on whether places have a 'strong tradition in culture or the arts'. Why? Because businesses need to attract people to work for them, and smart businesses know that people want an interesting and rewarding lifestyle. OECD research supports this,

**“What different destinations have to offer depends not just on economic factors, e.g. standards of living or locational factors such as accessibility, but also on intangible factors such as the “atmosphere” of a place or its general quality of life\*\*\*”.**

The seminal work on this subject, *The Creative Class*, by Richard Florida was published in 2002. Florida illuminated the fact that the basis of economic advantage has shifted from 'basic factors of production, such as raw materials or cheap labour, towards human creativity<sup>A</sup>'. He stressed the importance of attracting and retaining creative people as a basis for driving economic growth, and warned of the perils of failing to do this. He argued that 'quality of place' was critically important to the 'creative class'. And that quality of place was defined by a series of intangible or 'softer' factors, like environmental quality, atmosphere, street culture and cultural buzz<sup>B</sup>. Some cities and regions have taken this as a cue to re-invent themselves with major investment in cultural or contemporary arts projects, pursuing the so-called 'Bilbao effect'. Sometimes it actually works, more often it doesn't.

\* See *The Power of Destinations and Cities: The Destination Identity*, Communications Group Plc. (2008) and *Cities: The Destination Identity* (2010)

\*\* See Sean Young, Locum Consulting, page 11, *Power of Destinations*, Communications Group Plc. (2008)

\*\*\* *The Impact of Culture on Tourism* – ISBN- 978-92-64-05648-0 © OECD 2009 pp.27

<sup>A</sup> *The Impact of Culture on Tourism* – ISBN-978-92-64-056480 © OECD 2009 pp.34

<sup>B</sup> Such august bodies as OECD now write about 'cultural buzz' in their analysis of the success or failure of different communities. See *The Impact of Culture on Tourism* – ISBN-978-92-64-05648-0 © OECD 2009 pp34.

#### 4. Stories of place work best when they are based on historic and contemporary reality

Before exploring this idea we need to be clear what we are not talking about; we are not talking about the stories people try to tell about places to promote them to others – through marketing or branding. It is commonplace in the UK and in some other countries for ‘failing’ communities to be rebranded or marketed to inward investors or tourists. The result is often slightly surreal; glossy brochures printed showing executives playing golf in the sunshine, happy people working outdoors in beautiful landscapes on their laptops, and shiny new buildings on industrial estates. There is only one problem; no one believes this is what these places are really like. The trouble is we have already made up our minds about many of the places we experience based on other sources of information and on our own experiences. A little bit of glossy marketing isn’t going to change our minds.

Let me give you an example. A couple of years ago I stood on a stand at a heritage tourism event in London and tried to promote the industrial heritage of Lancashire, Manchester and Liverpool to the general public. Our hook to get people’s attention was a free trip to stay in Manchester in a high quality hotel, and a range of activities in the city’s museums, galleries and attractions. I should make clear that Manchester today is a thriving, modern, dynamic city with a vibrant cultural and economic life, and has a strong claim to being England’s ‘second city’. What we hadn’t factored into our cunning plan was what Londoners thought about Manchester. About half the people we offered this opportunity to said something like ‘ugh, no thanks... Manchester is grimy and grey’.

Frustratingly, common perceptions of places often have only a tenuous relationship with the objective reality that you experience as a visitor or resident. Why? Well, because we are sentient beings with heads full of ideas and perceptions, and are subject to countless cultural influences. As John Milton long ago recognised ‘The mind is its own place and can make a heaven of hell, or hell of heaven’. Curiously, Milton was only partly right, the mind of a human isn’t entirely its own place; it interacts with the minds of others through cultural exchanges to create shared narratives, collective stories of people, things and places. The reaction to our prize draw for a short break in Manchester was, I learned after interviewing people at the event, largely based on experiences of 10 or 20 years earlier, or in most cases was based on watching TV shows which portrayed Manchester as grimy, grey and post-industrial. In other words, people already had a powerful story in their heads about this place and it was affecting their behaviour. Perhaps the main reason why some engineered stories about places don’t stick in the wider

imagination is they have little or no basis in the real human experience of those places and communities. The reason some World Heritage Sites have built such powerful and effective narratives about themselves is because they have focused on their outstanding universal value. The result is that their defining narratives are real and readily believed by others (UNESCO’s endorsement of a site’s OUV gives international credibility to these narratives). This leads nicely into the second idea on my list,

#### Stories about places work a lot better when they have at least some basis in the contemporary or historic cultural identity of communities

Stories that seem true work better because people accept them based on their own experiences or empirical judgments. In the UK there is a joke that it is ‘grim up North’. It’s not that funny if you are from the North like I am, but whether we like it or not we understand the cliché and where it comes from. It is shorthand for the industrial north, the heartland of the industrial revolution, communities defined by factories, mines, mills, slag heaps and red brick terraced industrial housing. In this industrial dystopia it always rains, and is cold, the food is awful, and people have strange habits like breeding pigeons, wearing flat caps and drinking too much. Thousands of black and white movies, TV programmes, books, magazines and songs have engrained this imagery in the national consciousness. This is a matter of serious concern because it has long been recognised that places around the world are in a competition for trade, talent and tourism, and image matters.

**“Every place - community, city, state, region, or nation - should ask itself why anyone wants to live, relocate, visit, invest, or start or expand a business there. What does this place have that people need or should want? What competitive advantages does this place offer that others do not?\***”

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\* Marketing Places: Attracting Investment, Industry and Tourism to Cities, States and Nations, Phillip Kotler, Donald H. Haider, Irving Rein (1993) p14

These are the million dollar questions, because if you know the answers then you can make your city or region more effective and competitive. The trouble is that many communities haven't got a good answer to these questions. Whether we like it or not, we live in a global age, in which communities have to compete for talent, tourism and trade. There are more than 3,000 cities and many thousands of regions worldwide competing for investment, talented people and visitors. Perceptions of heritage assets exist for better or worse, as a kind of intellectual capital deposited in the minds of other people. Marketing and branding that denies or tries to ignore this tends to fail badly. Places that embrace their historic narratives and historic fabric as a point of differentiation and distinctiveness from other similar places appear to be more effective. At its simplest, stories about places have to pass a certain credibility test; it is more productive to try and nudge perceptions a little in a positive direction rather than try and impose a whole new narrative. This leads to the third idea on my list,

**The stories about places have a life and lifespan of their own – once established they can outlast the reality that created them**

The 'Its grim up north' narrative was never entirely true or accurate, and is now largely extinct in reality – but there was enough truth in it in the 19th and 20th centuries for that story of the North to take hold and 'stick' in people's minds. The point is that once such an idea sticks, shifting it is very difficult indeed – and these narratives can have profound impacts on economic development in communities.

**5. The long-term power of historical narratives of places**

My family have lived and worked in, and around, the English Lake District for many hundreds of years. They number amongst the many thousands of people who shaped that landscape through their farming and shepherding, producing its distinctive cultural landscape of dry-stone-walls, vernacular buildings, bridges, tracks, and field boundaries. Their pastoral farming tradition defined and sustains the landscape character through a distinctive pattern of private fields in the valley bottoms, and common grazed land on the mountains. The conventional historic narrative of this landscape says the rest of the world didn't think our landscape of much interest until the 18th and 19th centuries, when it was 'discovered' or 'invented' by writers like Thomas West and William Wordsworth. Before this, other people struggled to see beauty in this place. Daniel Defoe famously described it in 1724 as "The wildest, most barren and frightful of any that I have passed over in England... bounded by a chain

of almost unpassable mountains which, in the language of the country, are called fells."

A new narrative of our landscape emerged in the 18th and 19th centuries – a romantic, and picturesque, narrative about the beauty of mountains, lakes and wilder landscapes (and also, originally, about the independence and moral virtues of its people). This new story emerged through the pens and brushes of writers and artists as a counterpoint to an increasingly urbanised and industrialised Britain. The Lake District became in effect a place of spiritual renewal for an industrialised nation, a place where all that was 'awe-inspiring' and 'sublime' in nature could be experienced and appreciated. The poet William Wordsworth effectively invented the concept of national parks when he wrote in his Guide to the Lakes (1810) that he welcomed "persons of pure taste throughout the whole Island, who by their visits, often repeated, to the Lakes to the North of England, testify that they deem the district a sort of national property, in which every man has a right and interest who has an eye to perceive and a heart to enjoy".

Critically, almost immediately this body of ideas, this new narrative, started to affect the reality of the place. People who loved this landscape became ardent champions and staunch defenders of it against what they perceived as inappropriate social and economic changes. The construction of a reservoir at Thirlmere in 1890-94 led to the emergence of many of the concepts and ideas that underpin the conservation movement around the world today; arguments scarcely heard before about a new kind of 'ownership' of landscapes based on the right to look at and experience them regardless of traditional property rights. Even the writers who created the new narrative were a little alarmed when their words combined with new forms of transport and resulted in too many, or the 'wrong kind' of tourists. Wordsworth wrote passionately against the Kendal and Windermere railway on the basis it would result in too many tourists and would destroy the peace and quiet. "Go to a pantomime, a farce, or a puppet-show, if you want noisy pleasure... but may those who have given proof that they prefer other gratifications continue to be safe from the molestation of cheap trains pouring out their hundreds at a time along the margin of Windermere". However, we wanted to be like the romantics more than we wanted to listen to their warnings to stay away. The romantic ideal that anyone could stand on a mountain summit and experience a revelatory moment was, and is, enormously attractive to the industrialist or industrial/urban worker who wishes to escape the grime of industry, and who, critically, for the first time had the money and the time to travel and indulge in leisure activities. Throw into the recipe improvements in travel and this landscape (less than two hours drive from the heartland of the

industrial revolution) was a tourism hotspot waiting to happen. Today our sub-region, Cumbria, in which the Lake District sits, has a £2.07 billion tourism economy, hosts 54.3 million tourist days (from 40.8 million tourists) and employs 32,860 people. And in many ways the ability of our communities to change and evolve is deeply affected by the story we tell about this landscape.

Like many other historic communities we grapple on a daily basis with how to protect and sustain what makes our landscape and communities unique whilst simultaneously trying to change and evolve socially, environmentally, and economically. It is a difficult balancing act. Our historic narrative has made our landscape the 'second best known brand in England after London' but some commentators question whether the 42,000 residents are also trapped and restricted by it. Surveys of potential inward investors have revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly after two hundred years of selling ourselves externally as a form of rural arcadia, that we are perceived as a place where people go on holiday rather than a business location. Our heritage-based narrative exerts a powerful influence on everything from planning policy and development control, to the kinds of business activities we permit, to the kinds of recreation and leisure activities we allow in the landscape. One small example will suffice: A recent business proposal to build a zip wire across a Lake District valley was rejected by planners, in part, because it was felt to clash with the idea of this as a landscape that should be defined by 'tranquility', not noisy and exuberant fun. The story of our landscape, neatly captured in Wordsworth's words from 200 years ago quoted above, fuelled many people to object and ultimately stop the development. This is just one example from hundreds that could be recorded of how the narrative of our place affects socio-economic development. By defining our landscape in certain ways there are some futures that we can't have. There is an opportunity cost to being defined in this way.

**Be careful what kind of narrative you create about historic communities as it might just come true and someone will have to live with the consequences**

#### 6. When stories of place drive positive economic change

Our previous analysis of best practice amongst World Heritage Sites round the world also revealed a number of places where the story of the place was driving economic development in a positive way that was welcomed by the local communities. Defining outstanding universal value is one way in which collective narratives for places emerge (though because places have a pre-UNESCO heritage status this is often older than the nomination). An example we have written about at length elsewhere is the

UNESCO World Heritage Site of Portovenere, Cinque Terre, and the Islands (Palmaria, Tino and Tinetto). It is such a good example that it is worth revisiting briefly because it is a place where the defining narrative (captured in its outstanding universal value and in its national park designation) is powerfully aligned with the social and economic needs of the community. The key point is that Cinque Terre is a unique landscape shaped and sustained by its agricultural practices and traditions over a thousand or more years. Its distinctive terraces cultivated with vines created a 'constructed' and 'man-made' (the women did a lot of the work so I use the phrase loosely) landscape. But what is really interesting is that it is unashamedly bold in its narrative about being a human creation. There is a powerful reason for this, namely that the five villages of the National Park and World Heritage Site exist precariously beneath the terraced hillsides at the mercy of landslides if its traditional agricultural practices are not sustained. The very existence of these communities demands that its landscape traditions are sustained. The drive for becoming a National Park and a World Heritage Site was very much tied up with trying to revive and renew these communities and their landscape traditions. For most of the twentieth century the population of the hard and historically isolated region of Cinque Terre was in steep decline. The population fell from c. 8,000 in 1951 to c. 4,500 in 2008. In the 1960s and 1970s the local population was hemorrhaging away to the cities of Milan, Genoa and Rome in search of a better standard of living. So the narrative, or story, that emerged was explicitly about driving positive economic change to redress years of decline and depopulation. This was a heritage story with an economic imperative.

Stakeholders in the Cinque Terre WHS and National Park understand that their world-renowned landscape emerged and survives solely through the survival of a traditional agricultural socio-economic system. The key goal of everyone who cares about that cultural heritage has to be the preservation and support of that agricultural economic system. As Lorena Pasini of the National Park explained, they have three goals:

- 1. Reducing the costs of cultivation
- 2. Improving the quality of products
- 3. Developing the international reputation of the products of Cinque Terre

In short, the motivation for the WHS (and National Park) was framed from the start by the need to get greater 'world-wide visibility for Cinque Terre' and to use it as a means to 'empower the communities and their way of life to survive'. A marriage of creating and telling a powerful new story about Cinque Terre and backing it up with investment in economic infrastructure. The power of the story lies in how it has become a self-fulfilling prophecy

through the hard work and inspiration of the stakeholders. Because their story says this place is important because of what farmers do on their hillsides, they have had to provide solutions to keep those farmers in business. Solutions like supporting producer cooperatives to develop high-tech new facilities for winemaking and selling, building and staffing a new laboratory and product development centre, investing in new machinery to get grapes down the mountains more efficiently, and innovative new models to ensure that producers in the World Heritage Site get a premium for their products by giving them a market advantage in tourism information centres. Readers wishing to learn more about how the story or vision for Cinque Terre translated into actions that have changed the reality should read our previous work (World Heritage Status: Is There Opportunity for Economic Gain? 2009).

**FIVE: To be sustainable, conservation and preservation aspirations have to be aligned with host community's socio-economic needs and aspirations**

### 7. When stories trap places

People tend to make snap judgments about places, reducing them to simple headlines and mind pictures because they are collectively understood. Like many stereotypes and clichés they are sometimes true, and often useful shorthand. But they are also often based on all sorts of historic or contemporary cultural prejudices and biases. Perhaps inevitably we humans reduce the complexity of the world to enable us to communicate with others about places. We are all guilty of this reductive process, me included. The bottom line is that we understand the world through the stories we tell about it, as the great Nassim Nicholas Taleb, has written,

**“We humans, facing the limits of knowledge, and things we do not observe, the unseen and the unknown, resolve the tension by squeezing life and the world into crisp commoditized ideas, reductive categories, specific vocabulary, and pre-packaged narratives, which, on the occasion, has explosive consequences.”**

He was writing about the idiocy of the world's bankers and their simplistic assumptions, but the point is true in other contexts.

Some years ago I was working in Poland and was talking to a very attractive and bright young woman in a bar where she was serving beer. I asked her where she came from. ‘I’m from Oświęcim’ she said. I speak no Polish, but knew she was telling me she was from the place known to history by its forever-tainted German name of ‘Auschwitz’. To my embarrassment, my brain couldn’t process this information. Confusion. My narrative of that place had no room for people still living there. The confusion only lasted a few seconds until my rational brain kicked into gear and reasoned its way through this. But

the young woman had a look on her face that said she knew exactly what I’d just been thinking and was well used to it (I’m sure everyone who lives there is).

Later I visited the town and Auschwitz and Auschwitz-Birkenau. I was shocked again (even though I should now have known better) to see young people playing football in the parks down the road from the site of one of the greatest crimes ever committed. Someone scored a goal and his friends all jumped on him. I winced. It was almost like my brain was shouting, ‘How can you play football when the Holocaust is happening down the road’, which is of course totally unfair to the people playing football who share no guilt whatsoever for the events of 60 years earlier, and have as much right to play football in their park as I do in mine\*. My simplistic story for that place (which was entirely based on events over 60 years ago) was so strong it couldn’t initially cope with the reality of it being a living community of people going about their everyday lives.

The lesson is simple: what a place really is, what it is for the people that live in it, and what you or I might think it is as outsiders based on elements of its history, can be three really different things. Even those of us aware of this can adopt completely unreasonable attitudes to the people in those places because of our external narrative. The question becomes, is it healthy for the future of such communities to be decided by those of us who don’t live there, and who often think of these places in quite unrealistic ways? I have serious doubts. I have come to the conclusion that whilst we may all have a universal share in World Heritage Sites, we should often be non-voting shareholders – where sites are home to indigenous communities their voice is critical. World Heritage Sites may belong to all of us, but I think they belong to some of us more than others.

Auschwitz is, of course, an extreme example, but it reveals something that is common to many places that have an intellectual importance to people beyond the local residents – there is a risk that we impose our ideas, ideals and perceptions on other people and give too little consideration to what they want, or how they need to live. Tzvetan Todorov summed this up perfectly in *The Conquest of America*, when he suggested that the conquistadors discovered the Americas but not the Americans, they suffered from a cultural blindness to the people that enabled them to effectively wipe them out. Whilst we are hopefully not as violent, it’s a mistake we can all make when we discover and consume places\*\*.

\* It is, of course, a triumph of what is good about people that even in historically damned places people can build communities where they live, work and play like everywhere else.

\*\* *The Conquest of America*, Tzvetan Todorov. Harper Perennial. 1982.



### 8. Isn't this all a bit subjective?

Yes. Until very recently we didn't talk about public perceptions in much detail because they were so esoteric and unmeasurable that the discussion was almost meaningless. Even today we may suspect that places lose out in the competition for inward investment or tourism but it is a complex business trying to attribute this to any given factor\*. But technological change means that we are starting to get insights and measurement indicators of what people think about places. For some years now there have been systems to rank or rate different places for their liveability\*\*. But analysis of social media increasingly is starting to reveal how people consume places in much more detail. The tools are emerging, or have already emerged, which will enable us to get a depth of analysis on what people photograph, the words they use to describe places, and their sharing of information about heritage sites. We are going to be able to measure perceptions in ways that were once impossible. Anyone doubting the power of these new forms of analysis should see the Social Flow analysis of 15 million tweets after Osama Bin Laden's death or the ground-breaking work of Eric Fischer posted for comment on Flickr revealing the difference between what locals and visitors photo in the world's great cities\*\*\*. In practical terms this kind of comparative perception analysis has already resulted in newspaper headlines across the world highlighting the 'greenest' or 'worst' cities or regions. The identity and distinctiveness of different communities is going to become more important, not less, in this future. Places may have to learn to sell themselves in Twitter's 140 characters limit, so the premium on a clear concise narrative or story is rising fast. Being able to explain your landscape, city or region in a way that engages the rest of the world has never been more valuable. This is why places which have experimented with a UNESCO World Heritage-based identity, like Bamberg and Bordeaux, have reaped the rewards.

### 9. Conclusion – Stories about places are a serious business

We have visited and studied many dozens of World Heritage Sites in the past 5-6 years and time and again we find that the definitions of places, and their core narrative, have a profound effect on the lives of local people. A farmer in Cinque Terre told us he supported the World Heritage Site status because they got a price premium on their products like lemons. The heritage delivered added value for them. Where the narrative respects and honours the socio-economic systems of the host communities, people are often empowered by the UNESCO designation with their products, experiences and knowledge given a new lease of life and added value. Sometimes simply having your story recognised globally is a powerful stimulus to local pride and creates a groundswell of champions who feel empowered to engage with change and challenges.

However, we should also point out that we see the polar opposite of this in some sites, with people in host communities sometimes feeling marginalized and restricted from pursuing their lives and businesses. Sometimes the aspiration to use heritage to attract tourists results in a kind of theme park. We recently met with an old woman in China who had been told she could no longer keep pigs or ducks in her village, as her family had for generations, because it was too messy for the shoes of tourists. She was reduced to selling plastic gifts to tourists, something she admitted she thought lowered her status and was meaningless work. These are the two faces of what heritage can do for real people; one person prouder and wealthier because he gets paid more for his lemons, another person reduced to selling souvenirs and told her traditional way of life makes for muddy shoes. These realities flow from the defining narratives of the two different sites and are a reminder that we should all try and define places in ways that empower people and not demean them. We may be creating, as we saw with the Lake District case study, a story that lives and breathes and affects people's lives for centuries to come. This puts one hell of a premium on making sure we get it right.

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\* It has taken me a decade of interviewing investors, funders, government officers, and a range of other stakeholders to sound so sure that the identity of places is a critical factor. This argument is to a degree an article of faith based on that experience.

\*\* See, for example PricewaterhouseCooper's Cities of Opportunity Report which ranks 26 leading global cities against economic and social indicators including: intellectual capital and innovation; cultural vibrancy; health, safety and security; ease of doing business; technology readiness; and demographics and livability. The 2010 Mercer Quality of Living Index which covers 221 cities based on 39 criteria including safety, education, hygiene, health care, culture, environment, recreation, political-economic stability and public transportation. The Economist Intelligence Unit's World's Most Liveable Cities 2011 which uses similar data and focuses on availability of goods and services, personal safety and effective infrastructure. Lifestyle magazine Monocle's 'Most Liveable Cities Index' uses slightly different criteria including safety/crime, international connectivity, climate/sunshine, quality of architecture, public transportation, tolerance, environmental issues and access to nature, urban design, business conditions, pro active policy developments and medical care. For a more critical view of such indices see <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/dd9bba18-769c-11e0-bd5d-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1Lc5fKc>. These indices receive considerable coverage in the business media. E.g. <http://expertiseinlabourmobility.wordpress.com/2011/03/31/2011-top-cities-to-live-and-work-abroad-in-europe>

\*\*\* See <http://www.flickr.com/photos/walkingsf/> and <http://mashable.com/2011/05/07/bin-laden-visualization/>

Many of us in the heritage field are, whether we recognise it or not, trying to create, interpret or perpetuate stories or narratives about places. This exploratory paper has tried to highlight how powerful these narratives are, how they have a life of their own, and how difficult they are to control once created. Some of these narratives make some places highly effective at attracting talent, trade, tourism and investment. The lesson, we believe, is that it is in everyone's interests to ensure that the stories we create about historic places are aligned with the socio-economic aspirations of the host or neighbouring communities. If this alignment can be achieved then host communities will often feel empowered to maintain their historic distinctiveness because they will see in it an opportunity to create a better future for themselves and their children. If we fail in achieving this alignment then we know what happens, communities weigh the costs and benefits of their heritage narrative, and when the costs are perceived to be too high, and the narrative too restrictive of desired changes, then they will disengage and will turn away from that narrative. This is in effect what Dresden decided to do when it built the bridge that cost it its UNESCO World Heritage site status. With a growing number of sites and historic communities around the world being designated for their heritage value (UNESCO World Heritage Status being just one form of this) the potential for tensions between official heritage narratives and socio-economic

development aspirations of communities will continue to grow. There will be lots more Dresden scenarios. Unless we build into our understanding and narratives of heritage flexibility, and an accommodation of change, we are making a rod for our own backs.

If the new narratives we create are not capable of accommodating the change people will desire in the future then they are doomed to failure. As we give historic sites universal importance and define them through mechanisms like statements of outstanding universal value, planning policies, and other forms of protection (all done with noble intentions) we are often exerting a form of power and control over other peoples' lives. This paper is a plea for narratives that are socially and economically future-proofed, which take seriously the needs and aspirations of host communities. If we can find a more effective marriage between the preservation and conservation of heritage, and economic development then we will create a future in which people value, rather than resent, their heritage. This short paper does not, of course, contain all of the solutions, but we hope it will contribute in a small way to a movement towards an economic development model that puts greater focus on the power of historic distinctiveness, difference and stories in driving sustainable economic development.

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