

**The Peterborough Petroglyphs/ *Kinoomaagewaabkong*:  
Confining the Spirit of Place**

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**Abstract.** The Peterborough Petroglyphs/ *Kinoomaagewaabkong* rock art site is located in Ontario, Canada. Ever since it became widely known in 1954, the site has attracted scholarly attention and has captivated the popular imagination. In 1976, the Petroglyphs Provincial Park was created, an act which led to an increase in tourism. Fearing vandalism and deterioration, measures were undertaken in order to protect the site. In 1984, a building, which completely encloses the site, was erected over the white limestone outcrop. This structure has been widely debated in archaeological and heritage circles and is seen by many as a failed attempt at conservation. Furthermore, the building is believed to be an intrusive element which detracts from the site's relationship to its natural setting. Researchers have demonstrated the importance of landscape in Canadian Shield rock art and that the placement of rock art sites reflects spiritual and cosmological beliefs of Algonquian-speaking peoples. Thus, the site transformed into a museum and effectively cut off from its surrounding environment fails to convey the spirit of the place. It is suggested that culturally informed alternative measures, such as boardwalks and viewing platforms would have prevented the separation of the site from its natural environment and would have permitted a more appropriate experience of the site.

The Peterborough Petroglyphs rock art site<sup>1</sup>, known by the Indigenous peoples of the area as *Kinoomaagewaabkong* or “The Teaching Rocks,” is one of the few petroglyph<sup>2</sup> sites in the Canadian Shield, as

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of rock art as “art” has been disputed and depends largely on what is understood by “art.” Whitley (2001, 22-23) points out that Indigenous “people often lack a term that translates literally as ‘art’.” Furthermore, art in the Western world is often perceived as “art for art’s sake,” and calling rock art “art” implies it only serves aesthetic functions. However, art has many more functions, and rock art has been called as such for over a 100 years and is a convenient term that is worth keeping (Whitley 2001, 22-23).

well as one of the few rock art sites in Canada to be designated as a National Historic site. Other rock art sites include *Áisínai'pi* (Writing-on-Stone) in Alberta, Mazinaw Pictograph Complex in Ontario and Bedford Petroglyphs in Nova Scotia (Parks Canada 2004). Due to the site's uniqueness and popularity, the Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources (MNR) implemented measures to protect and conserve it, as well as to transform it into a tourist attraction. One such measure was the construction of a building directly on top of the site. In the following paper, I demonstrate that this building thwarts the understanding of the meaning inherent in this sacred Indigenous site, and that less intrusive and culturally sensitive conservation measures might be more suited for transmitting the spirit of the place.

The unique site, which represents one of the largest concentrations of petroglyphs in Canada, is situated in south-eastern Ontario, around 50 km north-east of the city of Peterborough. The petroglyphs have been carved on a white crystalline limestone outcrop also known as white marble, a rock that is rare in the Canadian Shield where granite and gneiss predominate. The rock outcrop slants gently at a low angle towards the south-east and the engraved area is roughly rectangular measuring 12 by 21 meters (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973, 8-9, 19; Lever and Wainwright 1995, 265). Around 300 clear petroglyphs have been identified. Hundreds more exist at the site, but due to weathering and superimposition they remain largely unidentified. The rock outcrop is criss-crossed by numerous cracks and fissures, the largest of which separates it diagonally into northern and southern halves. From the depths of this large fissure, which is around 30 centimetres wide, the trickle of an irregular underground stream has been reported (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973, 9). The carvings, which depict among others animals, human figures and items of material culture (e.g. canoes), are often arranged around natural fissures, rendering them an inextricable part of the rock itself. For example, natural crevices are used to portray what might be the womb and the genitals of a large female figure located on the western side of the outcrop. Sinuous forms interpreted as snakes have also been depicted near crevices and in some instances it appears as if the snakes were coming out of the ground. The site is believed to have been created by Algonquian-speaking peoples and is most likely over a thousand years old

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<sup>2</sup> Petroglyphs are carved, abraded or incised into the rock's surface while pictographs are painted on the rock's surface.

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(Vastokas and Vastokas 1973, 27), however no absolute dates were ever secured from the site.

The site was “discovered” in 1954 and despite its isolated location within the bush, it began to be frequently visited which brought on concerns of vandalism and prompted the implementation of measures to protect it (Vastokas and Vastokas 1973, 9-10). In the 1960s, the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests erected a chain-link and barbed-wire fence around the site and a hiking trail was created to facilitate access to the petroglyphs. In 1967, a wooden viewing platform was set up outside of the fence (Wainwright 1990, 66). In order to establish a permanent protection for the rock art, the Petroglyphs Provincial Park was established in 1976, a venture which further stimulated tourism at the site.

### **The *Kinoomaagewaabkong*/ Peterborough Petroglyphs Building**

In the 1970s, the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Province of Ontario established that the surface of the rock outcrop was deteriorating. In 1980, the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) was asked to determine the causes of deterioration and to advise on proper conservation measures. It was ascertained that the presence of water in the form of precipitation and ground water run-off promotes deterioration. The CCI recommended that a protective structure be built over the petroglyphs in order to shield the site from the weathering effects of acid rain, algae and frost, as well as from vandalism (Wainwright 1990; Lever and Wainwright 1995; Young and Wainwright 1995). The construction began in 1984 and the building, which cost nearly \$800,000 CDN (Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 30), was made available to the public in May 1985 (Government of Ontario 2006, 2). The seven-sided, 540 square metres building, which completely encloses the rock, is 10.7 meters high and has a raised cement walkway which surrounds the petroglyphs. The structure is composed of steel beams and glass. The large windows permit the visitor to view the surrounding environment, but more importantly, from a conservation stand point, the windows allow for solar heating of the rock so that it remains dry (Figure 1) (Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 33-34; Young and Wainwright 1995, 82, 89).



*Figure 1.* The Peterborough Petroglyphs Building (all photos by author)

The building has been lauded as a “protective” structure that is effective in preserving the petroglyphs. According to the CCI, it is “one of the most rational, scientific approaches to the preservation and protection of a rock art site in the world” (McLennan 1989, 11 cited in Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 33). However, the structure and its role in the preservation of rock art have been criticized by some scholars. First of all, certain carvings have been damaged during the construction of the building (Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 33-35; Joan Vastokas, personal communication 2007). Secondly, the flow of the underground stream has also been affected by the construction of the building (Kulchyski 1998, 23; Joan Vastokas, personal communication 2007). Thirdly, Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring (1995) have observed that the factors believed to promote the deterioration of the site were not adequately assessed by the CCI. Though the building was supposed to protect the site from acid rain, it was found that acid precipitation had little effect at the site (see Lever and Wainwright 1995, 271), and the barbed-wire fence seemed to have offered sufficient protection against vandalism (see Wainwright and Stone 1990, 23-24). The hermetic building introduces a new environment where natural processes, harmful and beneficial to the rock’s preservation, cannot take place and where novel conservation

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problems might arise (Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 38; Bahn 1998, 273).<sup>3</sup>

Regardless of the conservation issues, the building fails to reflect Indigenous ideas regarding spirituality and sacred locales where connection with the natural setting is important. It also promotes a static vision of the place.

### Indigenous Spirituality and Rock Art

For the Algonquian-speaking peoples, landscape is sacred and rock art sites are sacred places. Rock art sites are located at the junction of the layers of the universe, that is the Upperworld, the Earth's plane and the Underwater and Underworld where communication between the cosmic levels is effectuated through openings in the rocks such as caves and crevices where manitous (spirits) live (e.g. Vastokas and Vastokas 1973, 53-54; Molyneaux 1983, 5; Rajnovich 1994, 35). Rock art sites are also places where the four elements of water (i.e. lake or underground stream), earth, air and fire (i.e. sun) meet and can be experienced physically and spiritually (Gehl 2006; Shirley Williams, personal communication 2007). The four elements are essential in Ojibwa religious thought because they are the primordial substances from which the entire physical world (earth, celestial bodies, plants, animals and people) has been fashioned (Johnston 1976, 126, 136).

The importance of being at one with, and experiencing the entire universe (i.e. water, air, wind, rock) during religious ceremonies is essential for North American Indigenous people (Brown and Cousins 2001, 35). For example, the *Midewigun* (*Midé* lodge)<sup>4</sup> was constructed so as to be "open at the top, free to receive life, light, and the sound of the whole world and the universe" (Johnston 1976, 85). The phenomenon of interconnectedness can be observed at rock art locations, which have to be understood within the totality of their

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<sup>3</sup> For debates regarding the management of the Peterborough Petroglyphs see the journal *Rock Art Research* 1996 13(1) and 1997 14(1).

<sup>4</sup> The *Midewigun* was used in *Midewiwin* ceremonies. *Midewiwin* (meaning "mystic doings") or the Grand Medicine Society, most likely Ojibwa in origin, was a secret society of men and women who, with the aid of manitous, engaged in the healing of people through the use of herbs and medicine bundles. The *Midewiwin* was also responsible for preserving traditional lore: myths, legends and origin tales (e.g. Landes 1968)

landscape setting. The site's location within the landscape, the properties of the rock outcrop, the cardinal orientation of the sites and the presence of visual and acoustic phenomena at the sites all had the potential to reflect spiritual and cosmological beliefs of Algonquian-speaking peoples (Zawadzka 2008). For example, the rock's surface is often seen to form an integral part of the images (i.e. images can be framed by quartz veins or be painted or carved around crevices). Acoustic and visual phenomena, experienced in the form of echoes, or pictographs and petroglyphs appearing and disappearing depending on the light conditions, might be indicative of the presence of manitous (see Vastokas and Vastokas 1973; Arsenault 2004a, 2004b).

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The construction of the building severs the complex relationship between the images, the sacred rock which is considered a living entity and the landscape (e.g. the sound of the underground stream has been affected and the visitors are deprived of the sounds surrounding the site and of tactile experiences, such as wind touching one's skin). According to Joan Vastokas (personal communication, 2008), the construction of the building represents the biggest act of vandalism at the site.

Various scholars have recognised that the building impinges on the atmosphere of the place (e.g. Wainwright 1985, 27-28; Bahn, Bednarik and Steinbring 1995, 35; Parry 2000, 53-54; Joan Vastokas, personal communication 2007). According to Peter Kulchyski (1998, 22), the province of Ontario has built "a ... container[] almost as if it intended to destroy the spirit of the place."

The initial park planners observed that the site is of importance to contemporary indigenous groups and that there is a need to "create a facility which not only does not intrude on the site and its meaning but adequately conveys the appropriate feelings to those who chose to visit the area. The integrity of the carvings and of the people who created them should be of uppermost consideration" (Burton and Hogenkamp 1971, 17 cited in Parry 2000, 24). However, the integrity of the site has been compromised. The input of First Nations in planning the building must have been negligible despite the Ontario Parks assurance that consultation took place with the Chief and Council of the Curve Lake First Nation (Anishnabeg/ Mississauga nation). Partnership between Ontario Parks and the local Curve Lake

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community, which is regarded as the spiritual caretaker of the site, has only began to develop since the late 1980s, when Curve Lake became the recognized gate contractors (see Parry 2000, 18).

The building has transformed the site into a museum, which fossilizes the site (Bahn 1998, 273; Kulchyski 1998, 22). Though the museum's ambience does promote respect for the site and Indigenous heritage among visitors, it casts Indigenous heritage as a thing of the past and fails to emphasize the continuous relationship and use of the site by Indigenous people (i.e. the interpretative panel in front of the building is titled "Preserving the Past") (see Hendry 2005, 100 and Smith 2006, 294 for discussion of this static representation of Indigenous people). The interpretation of the main glyphs offered on the panels at the site also contributes to the stagnation of the meaning of the images, and the panels "act as tombstones" (Kulchyski 1998, 23).

Furthermore, the emphasis on preservation of past through conservation of material culture is not as prominent among Indigenous people where decay is part of the natural cycle (Smith 2006, 286). For example, among the Anishnabeg/ Ojibwa, the "custom [is] to let old things return to the earth" (Hendry 2000, 32). Furthermore, rock art can be retouched (e.g. in Australia) in order to sustain "certain values and meaning in a way that the simple existence of the sites could not" (Smith 2006, 54; see Loubser 2001, 82). Therefore the building not only cuts the rock from the surrounding environment and thus the natural spiritual bond, but also imposes a static interpretation of the site.

### **Reclaiming the Spirit of Place**

Though the building might be curtailing the feeling of sacredness, measures have been undertaken to emphasize the sacred nature of the place. Pamphlets produced for the park strongly emphasize that the site is sacred to Indigenous people. Since 1998, at the request of Indigenous Elders, photography has been prohibited at the site as "[i]t is believed that camera and video steal the spirit of the rock" (Parry 2000, 55; Government of Ontario 2006, 5). Since the 1990s, ceremonies and vision quests are held at the site and offerings, especially of tobacco, sage, cedar and sweetgrass are deposited on a special offering rock, as well as on individual petroglyphs. The park staff has recently painted the supporting columns within the building

in red, white, yellow, and black (spiritually significant colours) while a board containing information on the Medicine Wheel Teachings has been set up.

A visitors' centre known as the Learning Place (Figure 2), designed with input from the Curve Lake nation, is located on the way to the site. It explains *Kinoomaagewaabkong* within the Indigenous world view and emphasizes the role of the "Teaching Rocks" as a living site important for contemporary Indigenous spiritual life. The site is interpreted via the Teachings of the Medicine Wheel and the Four Directions and the building is designed so as to lead the visitors in a ceremonial circular manner around the four cardinal directions - from east to north.



Figure 2. View of the inside of the Learning Place with Medicine Wheel.

According to contemporary rock art management practices, conservation standards and protection measures are meant to have minimum impact on the sites. Structures, which should be easily dismantled and preferably constructed from materials such as wood, are supposed to leave minimum physical trace. The sacred nature of landscape should also be taken into consideration in management planning (e.g. Loubser 2001).

The building constructed over the petroglyphs is already deteriorating and its future is uncertain. The petroglyphs are here to stay, and will hopefully be integrated in the future with their landscape setting through new less invasive structures such as boardwalks and with greater planning input from the First Nations.



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