

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST:
Collective Memory, Sensory Perception, and the Emergence of New Interpretive Paradigms

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1. INTRODUCTION

Where is heritage interpretation going? How have the basic concepts and techniques of communicating the significance of World Heritage sites and other heritage places been transformed in the decades since the World Heritage Convention was ratified? What lies in the future? And what role will communities play? Will they speak with one voice or many? And since communities are also made up of people, what relationship will an individual's immediate sensory perception contribute to the site and—no less important—to the community's collective memory?

This confusing hodgepodge of questions may be just the right beginning to what has been jokingly called a hodgepodge of a session. Yet interpretation, I will suggest in this paper, needs to be chaotic and multivocal. And that's where the community comes in. When the interpretation of heritage sites is reduced to rigid guidelines or carefully follows a script that selects only officially approved themes, narratives, and morals, it becomes what Laurajane Smith has called an Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006). And that's the stage when heritage interpretation can become an Authorized Political or Religious Discourse against which no argument, alternative, or even rational argument is allowed. I contend that communities that live near or are emotionally connected to World Heritage sites—and other heritage sites for that matter—are not merely passive stakeholders or a convenient workforce for the management of the site. When I imagine the Best Practices of the future, I see the community as an irreplaceable source of opinions, impressions, contentions, jokes, doubts, and sobering reflections, without which the interpretation of a World Heritage site will seem in retrospect to have been for too long based on what has been called “facticity” (Raffoul and Nelson 2009)

What indeed are the best practices in interpretation today, in which the community can actively take part? Unfortunately the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO World Heritage Centre 2015) and its Operational Guidelines (Intergovernmental Committee 2013) offer little guidance. Neither the Convention

nor the Operational Guidelines even mention the word “interpretation” in the sense we generally now use it. The word “presentation” is used, as a link in a chain of taken-for-granted heritage virtues. Article 4 of the Convention, for example, avows that “each State Party to this Convention recognizes that the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, **presentation** and transmission to future generations” of the world’s cultural and natural heritage. But nowhere is the term “presentation” defined. It’s almost as if the significance of a site were seen as an intrinsic, self-evident fact of nature, and it need only be “presented” to be conveyed. But what exactly is presentation and how does it differ from interpretation? That is a question I’ll return to very soon.

But while we are talking about definitions, we might also pause a moment and consider the term “community” and how it is used in the Convention and the Operational Guidelines. For all the work that everyone here has done with World Heritage communities, it’s interesting that it’s used in only two very restricted senses. The first is in reference to the “international” community, namely the member states of the United Nations who have agreed on the principles of World Heritage. The other use of the term is somewhat vague, referring to a group of people, probably concentrated in a particular place, and whose rights and interests presumably coincide. The 1993 Nara Document, prominently referred to in an annex to the Operational Guidelines adds some nuance, but it raises more problems than it solves. It states that “responsibility for cultural heritage management of [a site] belongs, in the first place, to the cultural community that has generated it, and subsequently to that which cares for it” (Larsen 1995).

The impracticality of such a clear cut definition is something that, I suppose, only those who have actually worked with communities understands (Joseph 2002). For it ignores the fact that community boundaries are constantly changing, overlapping, coalescing, and fragmenting and that no community—even those represented by the most activist of leaders or defined by outsiders by the most quantifiable racial or genetic characteristics—doesn’t remain the same for very long. New values, new perspectives, and new challenges are constantly reinterpreting the past, creating a layering of stories that makes inherited identity become ever more complex through time. The “community that generated” certain sites or elements of cultural heritage is never identical to the community that later claims it. Community identity is dynamic and fraught with contention between different factions and individuals within it, shaped by contemporary as well as ancient conflicts and by internal power struggles as well. When we speak of “community” in relation to World Heritage, its role in interpretation must theoretically reflect the many perspectives and interests it contains.

So in the next few minutes I’d like to dig a bit deeper into the changing meanings and methods of heritage interpretation and propose some promising

new directions in which the community's role grow. I will argue that traditional modes of presentation and interpretation do not really convey the diversity and distinctiveness of community values, preferring to privilege outside experts' interpretive techniques. Heritage interpretation, as David Uzzel so perceptively suggested, "is stuck in a rut where the *how* has become more important than the *why*" (1998:12). The answer to the "why" question, I believe, lies in heritage interpretation's wider social function—not merely as the medium through which facts about the past are transmitted to future generations, but as a means for communities to share with visitors their reflections on the role of the past—for better or worse—in shaping their current identity.

2. THE HIDDEN POWER OF THE INTERPRETIVE MONOLOGUE

The classic modern work on the techniques of this profession, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, by the US Park Service official Freeman Tilden has, since its publication in 1957, been the clearest exposition of the philosophy of heritage interpretation, both cultural and natural (Tilden 1957). At the heart of Tilden's theoretical vision were his six guiding principles, each of which stressed the unique role of the heritage interpreter in connecting the visitor with the heritage. These included a creative communication style, the ability to spark the visitor's imagination about the significance of the site, and awareness of on what cultural and educational level a group of visitors should be addressed. Later followers of Tilden expanded the number of principles ((Beck and Cable 2002) to modernize them for 21st century audiences, but the goal of one-way instrumental discourse from an interpreter to his or her listeners remained the same. It was the communication not only of aesthetic and historical information, but also of an ethical order in which the conservation of heritage became the end of a presumably inevitable behavioral chain (Ham, 2007a). "Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection" was Tilden's much quoted dictum (1957:38), which has served as a guiding motto of heritage interpretation and the global profession it has spawned. In that sense Tilden's use of the term "interpretation" is closer to the traditional "presentation" mentioned repeatedly in the World Heritage Convention and its Operational Guidelines.

As defined in the 2008 ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICIP 2008), the term "presentation" denotes "the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretive infrastructure at a cultural heritage site." This is in contrast to the Charter's definition of "interpretation," which is "to the full range of potential activities intended to heighten public awareness and enhance understanding of cultural heritage site," including "community activities, ongoing research, training, and

evaluation of the interpretation process itself.” What distinguishes Presentation is that it is a one-way mode of communication in which the content is no more important than the skill with which it is conveyed. The understanding of a site’s factual significance, its “facticity” is perhaps its key element; appreciation of a site’s value is its intended effect.

This traditional top-down approach to heritage communication unquestioningly assumes the audience’s basic openness to being persuaded that the interpreter’s explanations possess authority and relevance to them. The audience is assumed to be distinct only as individuals, whose “personality and experience”—rather than pre-existing knowledge or socio-cultural orientation—are, according to Tilden, the targets of interpretation’s direct relational appeal. Its content—its view of historical “truth”—is seen as relatively unproblematic, derived from the factual perspectives of historians, architects, and archaeologists. Its strategic impact reaches no further than heritage practice. It is seen as an action designed to promote public appreciation for the importance of heritage, its physical vulnerability, and the necessity for its conservation, as carried out by the official stewards of the locality or the state by the methods and conservation principles they approve. But increasingly in our time—if not already in Tilden’s—heritage is not seen by everyone as a universally recognized and shared resource, nor are its official stewards always regarded as impartial guardians (Tunbridge and Ashworth, 1996).

As we see in so many places today, irreconcilable conflicts over what heritage is, how and to whom it is significant are matters of bitter dispute, most often between custodians of heritage properties and local or associated communities. Tilden’s six principles of interpretation fail to address adequately the legitimacy and reality of conflicting perspectives. Among the many examples that could be cited are the contested history of Jerusalem (Silberman 2001), the political controversies over the Kasubi tombs in Uganda (Kigongo and Reid 2007), the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan (Colwell-Chanthaphonh 2003), the cultural affinities and territorial significance of the Preah Vihear temple on the border of Thailand and Cambodia (Meyer 2009), or the conflict between Hindus and Muslims over religious primacy at Ayodhya in India (Bernbeck and Pollock 1996). And that is before we even start to speak about Boko Haram in Mali and ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

But we need not dwell only on these headline grabbing examples of violent culturecide to grasp the full extent of the problem, for in our era of “place branding,” urban revitalization, identity politics, indigenous rights campaigns, increasing regional autonomy, and tourism-based economics, the control of heritage sites and objects has become a bone of contention between regions, localities, communities, and nation-states all over the world. The phenomena of gentrification, demographic dispossession, and unanswered claims to the

repatriation of plundered or looted relics—and more sensitively—the control of human remains found at archaeological sites all pose even more complex challenges to conventional ideas of conservation and the possibility of a “universal” method of interpretation that will unfailingly mobilize community support for it (Silverman and Ruggles 2007).

3. FROM MONOLOGUE TO PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

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

Its aim was to replace the exclusive authority of the professional interpreter with a collaboration of stakeholders, including new people, new voices, and new themes into interpretive discourse. Professional interpreters would, of course, not disappear from the heritage landscape, but their expertise would be primarily on the transfer of empirical information—with or without the emotional “provocation” that Tilden hoped would to elicit interest and support. The Charter expressed the belief that the engagement of local and associated communities in interpretation would empower them to express aspects of local and regional identity as an integral part of a much more complex kind of collective memory than that articulated by expert opinion alone. Unfortunately, and it pains me to say this, the Charter was naïve.

As we all know, especially in the case of World Heritage sites, there is much more at stake in effective interpretation than public education, support for continuing conservation initiatives, or even community empowerment. In our neoliberal age, with international development agencies encouraging hard-pressed regions to take advantage of their heritage resources as engines of development (Cernea, 2001), the artful simulation of sanitized authenticity attractive to tourists has often become an end in itself. All too often tourist numbers trump community values and the desperate quest for economic benefit can turn a heritage site or historic district into a local industry in which the message conveyed by the members of

the community and the managers of the site may sometimes just reflect what they *hope* the visitors will like.

“Authenticity,” in this case, may be just a marketed illusion. But can be a marketed illusion with great political and economic power within the community itself. In the ongoing conflicts between former colonizers and formerly colonized peoples, between rival factions in developing countries and newly autonomous ethnic enclaves, between xenophobes and new immigrants in developed countries, the dominance of the old one-way, authoritative heritage monologue can have its own seductive appeal. The narratives may change but the power continues to flow from the top down, no matter where the political top may be. In that sense, expert-driven Authorized Heritage Discourse can still be wielded with all its exclusionary power. All too often a new ideological elite emerges with its own Authorized Heritage Discourse and instead of offering the newly enfranchised community a stable and sustainable medium for the expression of collective identity, a new struggle for interpretive dominance within the community begins. What are we indeed to make of the battle scarred inscription outside the government-run Kabul Museum that reads “a nation stays alive when its culture stays alive” (Dougherty 2011) But whose culture? Whose nation? Whose community?

It may be useful to examine the processes of community participation in heritage interpretation more deeply. Yes, we now understand the shortcomings of the traditional communications theory perspective, in which the audience is understood as a passive receptor and the community a passive bearer of tradition and an interpretive presentation is deemed to be successful when the audience has “correctly” understood what the interpreter told them and the community has accepted officialised definitions of their historical identity. What I am suggesting is a role for the members of the community in all their diversity to engage in a simultaneous multi-logue that is rooted in diverse and often conflicting perceptions of class, race, and culture. Every party to this interaction would try to respond to or fill in the gaps and unspoken assumptions of the others, to call to mind issues of significance that the others have ignored or omitted. It is that hodgepodge of community members’ opinions, impressions, contentions, jokes, doubts, and sobering reflections that I mentioned at the beginning. Without the essential involvement of the community enriching the interpretation of a World Heritage site, even its most slickly designed visitor centers and multimedia applications will lack roots among the resident population—the only group that can ensure the site’s long term sustainability.

4. HERITAGE AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

So what can be done to encourage inclusive community interpretation in an age when heritage properties and the experiences they offer are increasingly politicized

and commodified? I can here offer only some experiences of innovative programs that focus first on community heritage values, before building frameworks for community heritage products and services to address very real socio-economic need. Sustainability in all four of its now-recognized pillars must be the guiding principle for community involvement in all heritage sites. My main concern here is interpretation, so I will leave the questions of community involvement in and benefits from economic, social, and environmental sustainability criteria to other speakers in other sessions at this conference. But as is being widely recognized, the fourth pillar—that of cultural sustainability may be no less important than the other three (Nurse 2006).

I certainly don't intend to go into all the tragic stories of how the inscription of a world heritage site disrupts the life of the community; where it disrupts traditional lifeways and daily routines. Worse yet is the calculation of the success or failure of a World Heritage Property on the basis of visitor numbers, profit and loss statements, or even the eco-friendliness of its nearby hotels. In the cases where the World Heritage site is regarded as an alien presence and largely disconnected from its own traditions and collective memories, bad things seem often to happen: Social dislocation, crime, graffiti and alienation leads to deterioration when the values of the community are not taken adequately into account, making the world heritage site someone else's monument.

As noted in UNESCO's 2013 Hangzhou Declaration (Hangzhou Congress and UNESCO 2013), culture must be placed at the center of all plans for sustainable development, and not merely in the contribution that the cultural and creative arts make to the economy. Culture and cultural heritage, in this perspective, is a way of seeing, a way of perceiving values and ethics, not merely a collection of venerated buildings, landscapes, and things. A community's interpretation of its history and surroundings—if I may use that term in a non-factitious sense—is the key to every facet of contemporary life and development. In this regard, we must look beyond the traditional methods of communicating heritage significance to consider community involvement heritage interpretation to be a profoundly important public activity. Its place in public discourse is no less important than other debates about social policy, development issues, or immigration restrictions—all of them based on an evolving consensus of past, present or future “national identity.”

For if cultural heritage is indeed “unique and irreplaceable property” as the World Heritage Convention tells us, the exercise of collective memory should be a serious subject for informed public debate and reflection. It should be an ongoing process, using as its model the various forms of participatory action research that have already proved so powerful in public health, community development, as well as environmental, and agricultural initiatives.

Engaging communities in World Heritage programs is difficult, especially when the normative procedures of nomination, management, and periodic reporting are so complex that specialist expertise is required. But in forms of participatory action research, as simple a technique as Photovoice can yield amazing results (e.g. Gubrium and Harper 2013). What are a community's values and attitudes toward its heritage? No preaching or teaching will work as well as giving community members cameras and having them give voice to their deepest and sometimes painful impressions and memories. Provocative prompts can elicit wordless images that will then be given voice at community meetings and focus groups. But this is not just community conciliation. The recurring themes mentioned, the tone and tenor of institutionalized discussion, if heeded with as much attention as the monographs of scholars, will provide a clear view of community heritage values, which in turn will provide a rich and authentic source for the interpretation of the site. Along with Photovoice, other participatory techniques such as mobile oral histories—which my colleagues and I are now using in a multi-nation OAS initiative in the Caribbean (www.caribheritage.org) can place cultural heritage in a living context and integrate it fully in the community's contemporary concerns.

I do not mean to offer a single set of tools here but rather suggest that it is time that interpreters fully engaged communities as collaborators and creators—exposing, discussing, debating, and developing local expressions of identity that will find their place in multi-vocal site interpretation and in the underlying criteria as for the expansion of a sustainable tourism economy. Innovative programmes framing heritage as a platform for contemporary debate and discussion have proved successful at contested sites and “sites of conscience” (Sevcenko, 2002; Malan, 2008), but in all heritage sites, the widening and deepening of heritage interpretation from a transmission of specialised knowledge to the revitalization of collective memory and collective cultural creativity can have tangible benefits for everyone who manages, visits, and lives in the vicinity of a World Heritage site.

5. THE EPISODE OF THE MADEILINES

I would be remiss if I didn't mention another kind of community engagement, for a community that has been systematically excluded from full participation in the overwhelming majority of the 1007 current World Heritage Sites. This community is not restricted to a single location and its cultural traditions are as varied as the cultural diversity of the world. I am speaking of the people who were once branded as “disabled” but are now seen as fully human and entitled to the same right of those with the mobility, vision, hearing, and other cognitive abilities shared by the majority. All too often when interpretation is offered to this community, it is seen as a distinctly secondary service—to give those handicapped people at least something to remember be it braille strips on interpretive panels

or the use of ramps. The problem is that this community is growing rapidly as the people my generation, the great “Baby Boom” demographic bubble reaches the age where frankly speaking, mobility, sight, hearing, and other senses aren’t what they used to be.

Certainly there is some limit to the physical infrastructure that can be installed in a world heritage site where integrity and authenticity of the landscape or the architectural fabric is a sine qua non. But here too I think that a new paradigm of heritage interpretation can help serve this community and others as well. At present site interpretation is overwhelmingly visual, but other senses are involved in collective memory as well. In fact, most of us have gotten used to overworking our visual sense—through first-hand inspection, reading, and increasingly vivid 3D reconstructions as well. We too would be well to experience sites through a variety of sensory impressions, without the idea that touching, tasting, and hearing soundscapes are merely for the handicapped or for kids.

This brings me to another way of interpreting or more accurately apprehending the heritage, and it also past why I call this presentation “Remembrance of Things Past,” the familiar English title of Marcel Proust’s great turn-of-the-last century novel *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust was no heritage expert, but he did provide a classic example of the power of material culture—what we might call elements of cultural heritage—to evoke profound reflection on the past almost involuntarily. And I would suggest that an enhanced use of all the senses in cultural heritage interpretation is not just an amenity to the physically challenged, but might offer a powerful bridge between individual experience and the collective memory of the community.

Neuroscience has now shown us that an individual’s memory is thrown together from bits and pieces of various senses and feelings and it presents itself to each of us as a collage of past and present that we are forced to react to and try to make some sense of (Campen 2014). It parallels the process of participatory community discussion of photos or oral histories in the sense that it offers unexpected insights and connections. Yet it takes place within a single brain. Proust’s description of what has come to be called “the episode of the Madeleines,” is a monument of modern literature and an unforgettable illustration of how sensory stimuli begin a process of reflection that can retrieve some unexpected and deeply moving memories of personal relationship with the past.

As he wrote autobiographically of his experience meeting a friend and absentmindedly dipping a Madeline pastry into a cup of tea, Proust relates:

No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite

pleasure had invaded my senses, something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin... And suddenly the memory revealed itself. The taste was that of the little piece of madeleine which on Sunday mornings at Combray, when I went to say good morning to her in her bedroom, my aunt Léonie used to give me, dipping it first in her own cup of tea ... The sight of the little madeleine had recalled nothing to my mind before I tasted it. And all from my cup of tea.” (Proust, Scott-Moncrieff, and Kilmartin 1989: 48)

This involuntary sensory connection that merges past and present is now known as the “Proust Effect” and is used effectively in clinical therapy of memory disorders by facilitating an individual’s sensory experience and allowing the opportunity and freedom for him or her to come to an awareness of what it might mean to in the context of his or her life. This is precisely the reverse of the kind of didactic lectures and carefully prepared information that we all have come to associate with interpretation. Like the images in Photovoice, the goal is to elicit deeper feelings and values—and to transfer a passive observer into an active contributor in the interpretation of cultural heritage. I am by no means suggesting that heritage interpretation become nothing more than wild, free association. But together with the logical, factual information that heritage professionals provide (I can hardly imagine an end to OUV statements or state of conservation reports), it may help us to all benefit from a more holistic understanding of what World Heritage—all heritage—can mean. In our age of mass movements, social upheavals, demographic, economic, and technological changes, Freeman Tilden’s motto should be replaced by a new one that reflects the on-going paradigm shifts: “Process, not product; collaboration, not passive instruction; memory community, not heritage audience.” And the relationship between communities and World Heritage sites could, and maybe even should benefit more widely from tools of engagement, ethics, and empathy.

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