Heritage interpretation is for people: putting visitors at the centre of interpretation planning

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Heritage interpretation, like heritage conservation, is a complex of theory, practice, skills, resources and people. Nonetheless, it is not uncommon among heritage people who are not involved in developing or delivering interpretation to think of it merely in terms of the end product: the signage, the multimedia theatrette, the guides. Archaeologists tremble at the possibility of interpretation installations damaging vulnerable fabric. Architects quiver if the integrity of a site could be threatened by intrusive information sources. Historians suspect that stories will be trivialised for public consumption. Managers may contemplate the cost of interpretation and conclude that it is a low priority in the recurrent budget. It is usually only at the sharp end of delivering interpretation – which means the perspective of the practising interpreter – that the professional apparatus of the heritage business begins to think about the visitors/audiences/participants/clients/consumers for whom interpretation is devised and offered. This paper is grounded in the belief that interpretation is the front-line between heritage resources and the public, and that visitors desire many and different things in their encounters with heritage. Effective interpretation must therefore put visitors at the centre of site or agency planning to secure strategic public support and realise the fundamental cultural objectives of heritage conservation.

Awareness of visitor perspectives on heritage visiting is a crucial element in the entire process of heritage management. At base, society conserves heritage places, objects and intangibles because of a consensus that they contain significant meaning for present and future generations, which is worthwhile knowing and transmitting. That significance can be accessed via various media, from books to TV to the internet, but a major route to understanding heritage is to visit it. Visiting is the most active interface between heritage and the public. For this reason, interpretation is critical to the survival of heritage – not just individual sites, but the entire concept of a national estate, distributed collection or collective memory, supported by the broad community.

- *Interpretation is communication with the people for whom heritage is conserved of the cultural meanings of heritage resources.*

Effective interpretation requires not only knowledge of the significance and context of the place or object, but knowledge of the visitors to whom the program is oriented. It also requires the capacity to design an effective communications medium and the funds and personnel to implement and maintain it; both are factors whose absence too often cripples interpretation programs. This case for the special priority of understanding visitors is made because the marketing orientation on which is it based is a perspective somewhat resisted in heritage management.

'Heritage' in Australia was long a publicly-funded and professionally-operated sphere, but neither is reliably or perhaps desirably the case in the twenty-first century. Whether for good or ill, the paradigm of public benefit has transformed to the user-pays principle. The habits of professional authority have been challenged by the popular right to have citizens' knowledge, ideas and feelings respected in the planning and regulation of the social environment. These circumstances place new importance on ordinary individuals' taste. The discipline of professional response to the public at this level of detail is demanding, time-consuming and expensive – but it is also empowering and profoundly democratic.

Doesn't everyone visit heritage?

The new necessity to focus on the heritage-visitor experience generates insights with big implications for the management of sites and institutions. Most operations record visitor numbers as the raw evidence of effectiveness, which makes ever-increasing visitation the goal of successful business. But a number of studies in the past twenty years have focused on non-heritage-visitors, revealing that something like 42-54% of the population do not visit formal heritage places at all.[1] They do not necessarily dislike heritage or resent public money spent on it; they just don't feel that historic houses, archaeological sites, museums or cultural landscapes are for them, and they'd rather do something else. Other people feel this way about football.

This finding shakes the cosy expectation of heritage managers that sites are valued by all and that the entire community makes use of them. It is an uncomfortable possibility, but to acknowledge the figures about non-visitation opens up new lines of thinking about heritage visitors. For instance, it may be that non-visitors might be turned into at least occasional visitors by specially-directed programs of activities. There is some evidence that very particular interests can be drawn into heritage environments, as in the Australian Museum's exhibitions 'Punkulture' (1996, punk music photographs) and 'Body Art' (2001, tattooing and other forms of bodily decoration), which attracted an unconventional audience to the Museum, though it probably did not transform them into regular visitors.

But while such topics can be justified in the context of an anthropology museum, it could be difficult to find relevant aspects of, say a historic railway or a distant gold mining site that would appeal to so-called non-traditional or non-typical audiences. Recognising such limits, cultural policy commentator Tony Bennett concludes in an Australian study that 'there are significant sections of the population whose members will prove beyond the reach of any kind of policy initiative or marketing strategy' to induce them to visit heritage institutions.[2]

New pressures to make heritage accessible to all

I believe it is worth taking this conclusion seriously, because there are now tremendous pressures on heritage managers to prove that they are accessible to all – not just physically but also intellectually and increasingly, socially. Access to heritage resources is today a prime rationale for operational funding to heritage agencies and museums. The goal is buttressed by a social justice argument that all segments of society should be able to visit and enjoy heritage assets. Modern outcomes-focused management regimes demand ever-increasing attendance figures as the proof of success. This goal articulates more or less satisfactorily with the broad democratic mandate of public service heritage managers to enable as many visitors as possible to enjoy a heritage visit. To some degree, the equity ideal of Indigenous and multicultural presence in and demand for public culture in the past twenty years has refined the formal requirements of proof of accessibility beyond mere numbers of feet through the doors, by introducing programs to encourage or represent these interests in the site, museum or occasion.[3] As a result, Australians have drifted into understanding the social inaccessibility of heritage as a function of non-Anglo ethnicity.

This limitation has recently been bridged in the UK by the Labour government's social inclusion policy, which enlarges the catchment of what used to be called the disadvantaged to include people of certain age groups, physical disabilities, immigrant status, and class, in particular people of the socio-economic classifications C2, D and E. There, nationally-funded museums are required by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport since 2002 to meet performance standards with annual targets for increasing attendance by non-traditional visitor groups such as refugees and unemployed youth.[4] Similar performance indicators are to be introduced in 2004 for English Heritage sites.[5] This kind of social engineering is not yet on any Australian heritage agenda, but Australia has a long habit of following international practice.

Heritage-visiting as an elite activity

The studies already referred to, and more, confirm that heritage-visiting is predominantly an elite-culture activity, insofar as visitors' levels of education and income are much higher than the general population distribution would indicate. This is not totally and exclusively true, but levels of education certainly shape the kinds of heritage interests visitors indulge.[6] Art museums attract the highest proportion of tertiary-educated visitors, followed by history and natural science museums: in a study in Adelaide, 42% of art museum visitors had tertiary qualifications compared with 35% of history museum visitors, while the state average of tertiary qualifications was 5.5%.[7] A British study shows that 35% of highly educated people visited all of a range of heritage attractions, as opposed to 17% of minimally educated people.[8] This still means that nearly half of Adelaide art-appreciators and a bit more than half of history-tourists had lower education credentials, and that about two-thirds of less-educated Britons visited at least one heritage attraction. Such numbers raise the question: if this is not acceptable, what is equitable representation in the visitor profile of a museum or heritage resource? Since the British social inclusion policy has upped the ante by specifying precise increases in visitation by less-educated people, the logical but reductive view would seem to be that the characteristics of users of heritage facilities should be equivalent to overall national demographics.

Whatever the ideal, this is not the case at present, which surprises and distresses many heritage managers who have not thought much about visitors.[9] Heritage people tend to be a warm, fuzzy bunch of conservationists who would like to share their enthusiasm with the maximum of other people. In relatively classless Australia, it is assumed that anyone who wants to can access heritage resources – and it is probably true. But once again, the acute purpose of the new British standards to assure access puts a new cast on the subtle qualification, 'anyone who wants to'.

Visiting heritage is not shaped merely by the material conditions that enable it, such as enough money to pay the admission charge, a car to get there and the time to do it.[10] One needs to be motivated by sufficient interest, an intangible which is the product of taste. It could be said to be an idiosyncratic taste: some people are interested in heritage and others are not, just as some people are mathematical or musical and others aren't. These realities are undeniable, but if sought on the wider social scale, it becomes evident that the taste for heritage-visiting conforms to patterns which suggest it is not merely a personal choice, as with the studies which correlate educational standards with heritage-visiting.

Various models have been used to understand what motivates people to visit heritage resources: psychology, leisure studies, sociology.[11] Each approach has something to contribute to enlarging heritage managers' and interpreters' focus on visitors, though the findings don't necessarily articulate with each other in any coherent way. They all, however, confirm that heritage-visiting is predominantly an elite-culture activity.

A psychological approach to heritage-visiting

The Australian psychologist of tourism, Philip Pearce, makes an interesting application of the well-known Maslow's 'Ladder of Motivation' model to describe what tourists seek out of their holiday experiences.[12]

Maslow's hierarchy of motivations	Pearce's model of the 'tourist career'	Possible application to heritage visiting
Physiological needs	Sun, sport, sex destinations	?
Security/stimulation needs	Prestige, novelty destinations	Achievement of 'been there, done that!'
Love/belongingness needs	Destinations that nurture relationships (eg family, group)	Visits that enable group bonding
Self-esteem needs	Destinations offering self-development: cultural tourism	Culturally meaningful activity
Self-actualisation needs	Destinations offering self-actualisation: cultural tourism	Pilgrimage to special places, objects

This crude delineation of Pearce's model suggests that the people likely to be most interested in the heritage values of heritage-visiting are at the top of the ladder of motivations, meaning that they must be adequately satisfied by the lower steps and have the psychic energy to move on to more abstract needs. This is quite a refined state of holiday-making or leisure-seeking, and probably defines quite a small segment of visiting-choices. One may, of course, experience elements of many motivations within one destination, but the choice of destination is probably largely determined by a dominant motivation. It may also be possible to satisfy the lower rungs of Maslow's ladder by visiting a heritage place for other-than-heritage reasons, such as enjoying an excursion with one's family.

What do Maslow's and Pearce's ideas tell heritage managers and interpreters? First, they remind us that people visit heritage for diverse reasons. Ordinary people are not necessarily or primarily interested in what professionals conceive as the heritage values of a resource, though they might be charmed or inveigled into them if presented in an attractive way that satisfies their chief motivation. Family activities, thoughtful management of bus touring groups, opportunities to sit down and enjoy the sun or the view could be such devices.

But heritage people should be aware that only a small proportion of all visitors who arrive seek the depth which professional standards make the main interpretive product of heritage organisations. Heritage managers need to consider the implications for the kinds of interpretive programs offered.

A leisure studies approach to heritage-visiting

An American researcher, Marilyn Hood, introduced this now-influential way of understanding museum visitation, equally relevant to heritage places.[13] Her special innovation is to consider heritage-visiting as essentially a leisure choice, rather than a cultural duty, educational opportunity, meditative experience etc. She reviewed the literature on what motivates decisions to choose one or another form of leisure, and tested it on a large sample of the population of Toledo, Ohio, assessed as non-visitors, occasional visitors (making one or two visits per year) and frequent visitors (three or more visits per year).

The comparison of tastes between occasional and frequent visitors casts a stark light on the kinds of interpretive services provided for heritage visitors. The high standards of most heritage professionals constitute the material that delights frequent visitors, but actively turns off occasional visitors and reinforces the disinclination of non-visitors. As Hood writes: 'museums generally offer or emphasise the very qualities that are least appealing to the occasional participants and non-participants, who are looking for significantly different leisure satisfactions'.[14] To learn from Hood's work, heritage managers must acknowledge different tastes among visitors and provide them with different kinds of interpretive programs, some challenging, some gently sociable.

A sociological approach to heritage-visiting

Following the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu offers a further way of understanding the different tastes of groups of people. Bourdieu is rare among theorists in actually having conducted research into what people get out of art museums, but his studies of the construction of 'tastes' (dispositions) are much broader and include tastes in music, food, films, furnishings and so forth.[15] Picking out just one strand of a dense theory shows that wealth (or its absence) alone does not shape access to cultural resources. More important is the individual's possession of 'cultural capital', the competence or capacity to understand, to grasp, to tune in to heritage-type resources. Level of education is a shorthand index to cultural capital, but it is also constructed in the family by parental values. People who do not have the cultural capital to recognise and enjoy cultural resources will feel museums and heritage places alien, and vice versa. The capacity to participate is not ruled out by financial poverty but cultural poverty, which explains the existence of both rich slobs and the cultivated poor.

There are weaknesses in the theory (it's mechanistic, and tends to apply on the statistical scale rather than explain individual behaviour), but it convinces many. It describes exactly why Bennett believes there are limits to some segments of the population being interested in heritage, and why the UK government's insistence on targets of museum-visiting by social classes C2, D and E (in blunt English sociology), are pointless. The acquisition of cultural capital is a long process of socialisation, not the product of quick exposure to Culture.

Attribute of leisure activity	Non-visitors	Occasional visitors	Frequent visitors
Being with people	Yes, but not in museum	Yes	Yes
Doing something worthwhile	Duh	No	Yes yes
Feeling comfortable, at ease	Yes, but not in museum	Yes	Yes
Enjoying a challenge	No	No	Yes yes
Having the opportunity to learn	No	No	Yes yes
Participating actively	Yes, but not in museum	Yes	Yes

Hood found that non-visitors share the kinds of tastes that occasional visitors enjoy, but do not expect to find them in museums. Occasional visitors recognise that the satisfactions they seek in leisure can be found in museums, but not enough to motivate more than the odd visit. Frequent visitors know that they can regularly find in museums the kind of challenging pleasures they want out of leisure activity.

The alternative (possibly more viable) is to redefine Culture and its subsets such as heritage into something which is recognised and valued by people with less than high levels of cultural capital. In any case, this perspective buttresses the conclusion for heritage interpretation that when non-typical heritage visitors venture into a heritage site or institution (driven by other motivations than pure interest in art or history), they need services that make them feel at ease and at home. Failure to provide them is to make ineffective use of heritage resources, to waste scarce funds on programs that do not reach and affect all visitors.

The marketing orientation

The last sentence could be another way of saying: heritage must be marketed to diverse visitor tastes. The idea of marketing is unpleasant to many heritage professionals, whose own interest in and commitment to cultural conservation is a deeply personal, lived-in state. However, the responsibility to keep heritage resources functioning rather overrules the genteel prejudice against making it pay for itself, as the current order demands. But more than that, the previous analysis of the importance of understanding different visitors in providing heritage interpretation can be understood neatly in terms of a 'marketing orientation'. Marketing understood in this way means not a manipulative hard-sell, but a well-matched exchange between producers and consumers.[16] This could mean delivering heritage experience to the segment of people who already value it, and it could also mean developing variations shaped deliberately to appeal to other, non-traditional segments.

In the technical language of marketing, heritage agencies and museums tend to be highly focused on their products: sites, collections, exhibitions, programs. The risk of intense product focus is that the producer fails to see how the market moves on. The classical case study concerns the post-war railway freight industry, which focused on running railways rather than providing transportation, and, convinced that rail growth was assured, ignored the growing competition of road and air transport.[17] The moral is that producers should keep a weather eye on market shifts. A marketing orientation means the producer is aware of the needs or desires of consumers, produces goods that they want, stays in touch with changes and competition, takes action to re-shape the product in line with customer demand – and survives and grows.

The idea that heritage should be packaged for specific audiences is a challenging perspective for a profession that bases its authority on discipline expertise. But as suggested above, there are a great many reasons why providing different interpretive experiences is good practice in response to new understandings of heritage visitors. The stimulus of necessity to make heritage widely valued is not necessarily bleak. Developing interpretation 'products' for different market segments corresponds aptly with the psychological, leisure and sociological evidence that visitors want and seek different things in heritage visiting. It requires some flexibility on the part of heritage people to acknowledge that visitors might find elements of interest that constitute only part of the heritage significance as formally identified. But it would be ignorant and foolish to ignore the situation.

Conclusions: interpretive products for diverse visitor markets

So what are the parameters of different interpretive programs that might be developed to suit the multitude of frequent, occasional, bonding, prestige-seeking, cultural, self-actualising visitors and potential visitors to heritage sites and museums? Lest reference to interpretive products creates a picture of apples, oranges and lemons to be selected at the counter, it's useful to keep in mind the image of the smorgasbord: a variety of products to be chosen and perhaps mixed by the visitor in the proportions that suit each individual or party. Informing visitors of the range of available options is perhaps the hardest achievement here, but user-friendliness in information, approach, and delivery indicate the key.

Much can be done to optimise the interpretive experience of visitors by paying attention to the social interaction of differing groups and facilitating their comfort. This means such things as places for two or three people to sit and gaze and chat; activities for parents and children to do together; adequate space for larger groups to mill without feeling illegitimate. Some big (well-resourced) museums are more advanced in this kind of provision than many smaller (less-resourced) heritage sites. Despite apparent discrepancies of scale and funding, it is worth observing the biggies and consulting their interpretation and visitor services staff for ideas about visitor awareness.

One conclusion must stare from this paper: it is no longer possible to specify to an interpretation-developer that a program should 'broadly appeal to everyone'. It is neither realistic nor professional to expect a one-size-suits-all approach to heritage interpretation. If only one program can be afforded, it must be designed for a selected segment of visitors: a managerial choice must be made. Ideally, it will be informed by genuine knowledge of the site's or organisation's visitation; if systematic evidence is not available, informed guesswork is a better option than the pretence that everyone is to be satisfied. The ability to focus on the characteristics of a real market segment will make for a better quality product, leading to happy heritage consumers and advocates.

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