

Preservation of archaeological heritage: the spell of interpretation

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Abstract

In consequence of The Convention of La Valetta on protection of the European archaeological heritage, archaeology evolved from research exclusively performed by universities and museums to a developer-funded archaeology that is part of the Spatial Planning Policy. Nevertheless, this new approach of archaeology did not result in sites which are easily accessible, neither in an implicit nor explicit way, for visitors and the host community. This research focuses on the process of interpretation of archaeological heritage in situ. The suggested process of opening up uses the experience in relation to memories. The ontological content of the experience, leads to 'an experience of being' in contrast to 'an experience of event', which makes it a hermeneutical activity. The reading of Nora's 'lieux de memoire' is always a matter of interpretation, but it must take place in a temporal space, where past and present are interconnected, and it is a reading that recognizes the distance in time as a continuous process. We will discuss different methods for the creation of a conceptual framework as a basis for empirical research in the field of experiential qualities of archaeological sites. A concept based on multisensory experience and the semiotic model of Peirce, in particular the interpretation of the relation between a sign and its object, offers a significant instrument that reveals experiences and associations. In this way a sensorial layer is added. Presentation of archaeological sites by means of different opening up-strategies generates opportunities for a broader heritage and sustainable environmental awareness and is considerate of our responsibility for future generations.

Keywords: preservation, interpretation, presentation, experience, memories, semiotics, flow.



1 Introduction

This research focuses on the process of interpretation and presentation of archaeological heritage 'in situ'. Making archaeological sites accessible to a broad audience means that archaeologists accept the challenge of illustrating the relationship between the archaeological data and the interpretation presented on site, in such a way that the material is not only physically, but also intellectually accessible. Given the fragmented character of archaeological remains, this is not at all obvious. Interpretation and presentation must empower the audience to form an image of the heritage at large without it being present in its entirety.

An even greater challenge is how to keep visitors from being disappointed because they failed to make the connection between the presentation of the fragmented remains of a past society and what they expected to visit.

Bearing in mind the reasons why people visit an archaeological site, this research suggests taking into account these different motivations in the process of designing the presentation. In this way, interpretation exceeds mere description of what was found and offers the visitor the possibility to have an emotional interest in the archaeological heritage: interpretation and presentation provide the visitor with an emotional experience. As early as 1957, Freeman Tilden argued that "any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile" [1].

2 Literature review

There is a considerable amount of literature concerning the subject of interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage on site. Among others Tilden, Lipe, Jameson and Sivan all pointed out the benefits of presentation 'in situ' [1–4]. Direct visual contact with the site allows visitors to grasp the effect of the passage of time and enables them to become involved with the archaeological remains. The visitors' consciousness responds to the identity of a place, the spirit of place, and to the intangible emotional and impressionist elements absorbed into the physical fabric of a place, generated by human interaction over time [5].

Over the last years there has also been a growing interest in the motivation for visiting heritage. The studies set up by Poria, Biran and Reichel pointed out that some visitors of heritage sites expect the visit to be an educational experience, while others regard it as an enjoyable day out or as an emotional and thought provoking event. Based on these different motivations for visiting heritage sites Poria, Biran and Reichel distinguished three groups of visitors: those who expect to feel the heritage, those who expect to learn and those who expect other experiences. Presentations of sites therefore should not only focus on the cognitive effects but also on the emotional elements of the visitors' experience [6–8]. If visitors see interpretation as a mechanism that facilitates experiencing the archaeological heritage in a way he or she otherwise never would, this calls for further research into what sort of emotions people are looking for and experiencing visiting on-site heritage.



This brings us to the subject of value and meaning of archaeological heritage. Lipe pointed out that at the heart of the value of cultural resources is their ability to serve as tangible links to the past in a way history cannot. The present-day visitor feels in touch with a past that is real through the things made and used in the past. This quality makes archaeological resources powerful symbols of the past. What these symbols evoke is highly determined by the knowledge the visitor brings to the encounter or that he or she is provided with on the spot. It is this knowledge that determines whether the encounter is meaningful [2].

3 Theoretical framework

Since this research focuses on presentation ‘in situ’, defining more closely the sense of place is of vital importance to develop a successful interpretation. The methods of research developed in psychology by C.S. Peirce and M. Csikszentmihalyi prove to be very valuable in our search for interpretation and presentation that take the visitors’ motivation into account.

3.1 Sense of place

Archaeological sites are in-between sites. They are in-between presence and absence, at the same time visible and invisible; they refer to the sense of place. The Roman concept, the sense of place or ‘genius loci’, is not hidden but latent and deals with the physical and spiritual heritage, or the tangible and intangible heritage. The Australian Burra Charter, 1979, revised in 1981, 1988, and 1999, emphasizes that significance is “embodied in the place itself, its fabric, setting, use, associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects” [9]. This Charter assigns an important role to the meaning of the site: “the sense of place, and the experience of the visitors to, and the inhabitants of, a location”. This is in correlation with the normative concept of architecture as worked out by the architect-theoretician Christian Norberg Schulz. In his famous book ‘*Genius Loci: towards a phenomenology of architecture*’ he describes how tangible and intangible phenomena contribute to the character of a place, the spirit of the place, the genius loci. “A place is a space which has a distinct character. Since ancient times the genius loci or ‘spirit of place’ has been recognized as the concrete reality man has to come to terms with in his daily life.” What then do we mean with the word place? Obviously we mean something more than abstract location. We mean a totality made up of concrete things having material substance, shape, texture and colour. Together these things determine an ‘environmental character’, which is the essence of place. A place is therefore a qualitative ‘total’ phenomenon, which we cannot reduce to any of its properties, such as spatial relationships, without losing its concrete nature out of sight”. Norberg-Schulz was the pioneer who proclaimed that the cultural and historical significances of a place support the experience [10]. Altman and Zube explain that when space becomes a place it achieves a psychological and symbolic meaning [11].



The sense or spirit of place, a magic reality, refers to a poetic experience in the modern society. Referring to concepts of the German sociologist Max Weber, the spirit of place can be described as a magical world immersed under the spell of enchantment [12]. The term 'spell', an ancient word of Anglo-Saxon origin, is connected with 'narration'. The hermeneutical power of the genius loci transmits meanings and narrative. The narrative method activates people to get into conversation with the story of the cultural heritage; it evokes memories and emotions in the imaginations.

In the process of creating a concept for the opening-up of archaeological sites, it is important to explore and investigate places as the source of myths, memories and identity. This process of opening-up uses experience in relation to memories. But it includes more than just the effects of the memory which are connected to objectified events; it is also related to imagination and empathy [13]. These last two aspects are comparable with the architectural experience, as noted by Bloomer and Moore, by which emotions are projected [14]. The ontological content of the experience, leads to 'an experience of being' in contrast to 'an experience of event', which makes it a hermeneutical activity [15].

To quote Harold Pinter: "The past is what you remember, imagine you remember, and convince yourself you remember, or pretend to remember" [16]. Pinter distinguishes three ways that lead to the past: the memory, the historiography and the relicts. Memory and historiography are processes of insight, which are closely linked with each other. Relicts, however, are no processes, but the results of a process. Today cultural historiography covers a broad basis of sciences. Historiography is also subjective and within this perspective it is an extension of 'emotional memory' with the objective to imagine the past and to remember the future [17]. Emotional memory as an interpretation of relicts, stories and legends differs in the way in which the knowledge of the past is acquired and appreciated, but also in the way in which this information is preserved and interpreted. Our way of thinking is always an act of understanding or interpreting. For Gadamer, this is a dialectical process, an ongoing process, which is represented in his polemical work, 'Truth and Method' as the hermeneutical spiral [18]. The hermeneutical spiral leads from the general to the specific meaning and back again. According to this theory, it is not possible to really understand the archaeological site from one component only unless you understand the site as a totality or a whole, but likewise it is not possible to understand the whole without knowledge of all components. "This prejudgment is considered essential to understanding; it is not a barrier but the medium of understanding. If modified in an interpretive encounter it forms a new basis for the next engagement, and so on" [19].

The genius loci is connected with the mental loci or what Nora called the 'lieux de mémoire' [20]. The layer of meaning, the reading of the 'lieux de mémoire' is always a matter of interpretation, but it must take place in a temporal space, where past and present are interconnected, and in which the distance is recognized the distance in time as a continuous process. Ian Hodder considered archaeology "as a set of dynamic, dialectical, unstable relations between objects, contexts and interpretation" [21].



There are two ways to interpret historical sites and monuments: on the one hand there is a historical reading while on the other hand there is an actual and more modern way of reading. The combination of both readings results in the best fusion of horizons, a dialogue between the horizon of the past and the one of the present. Archaeological sites are like a palimpsest. They are formed through different layers of fragments which overlap without erasing the traces of the past. These layers of meanings challenge our capacity to understand the significances by means of measurable and controllable elements. Understanding is a cognitive activity that is derived from an operation of decoding which is of a higher level than emotion or empathy. Discovering of these layers of significance is a historically contingent process [22]. Each time when a layer of the past is visible and only when signs are emotionally charged with content in relation with the context, do signs become symbols and in addition to this, meanings are imagined, unveiled and veiled. Archaeological relicts belong to the everyday life but at the same time they are symbols and add meaning to the past.

3.2 Semiotics

Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic model of representations consist of three elements of which the semiotic process is the first one. In this semiotic process Peirce distinguishes an object, a sign and an interpretant. The object is the first component. In our study the object can range from an entire past society to elements like trade, religions or every-day life of a craftsman. The second element in the representation process is the sign. A sign is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. A sign represents a specific aspect of an object, not the object as a whole. Archaeological remains can be taken as the signs of past societies. The final component of the semiotic model of representation is the interpretant, the concept, the meaning of the sign, the idea to which it gives rise. In the semiotic triangle the sign and the object are

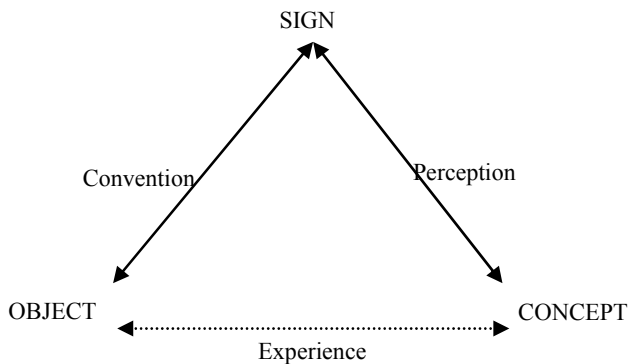


Figure 1: The semiotic process also called the semiotic triangle [24].

connected by convention or the culture in within which the person lives. The concept and the object are connected by the person's experience. The sign and the concept are connected by the person's perception [23, 24].

The second element of the model contains Peirce's division of the sign-object relationship into icon, index and symbol. An icon is a sign that resembles the object. The relation between the sign and its object is based on the sign's resemblance to or the qualities it shares with the object. The relation sign-object is indexical when the sign is physically connected to its object. A sign whose relationship to its object is arbitrary is a symbol. The relation sign-object is symbolic if the relation is based on social or cultural conventions. Symbols represent cultural categories, values, ideas [23].

Thirdly, the model takes the role of 'collateral experience' into account. The way in which a person perceives or understands a sign not only depends on the relationship between object and sign, but also on previous experiences that include some prior knowledge of the object and the context in which the representation is perceived [23].

Peirce's semiotic model can be used to establish how the sign-object relationship conveys meaning to visitors of archaeological heritage in situ. Considering the archaeological remains as the signs of the past society, the object they represent, implies that the sign-object relationship determines the way a visitor will read the archaeological heritage in combination with his prior knowledge of the past society and the context in which the visitor perceives the representation of that society.

Buccellati already pointed out that the signs of a monument are easily perceived by the culture from which they arise. For instance an aqueduct or a temple were endowed with multiple meanings which we can only suspect when looking at their remains. We must assume that the people who constructed these monuments had a full perception of their semiotic meaning. Interpretation seeks to identify the meaning or value these signs had for the ancient. The effort to communicate the value of ancient signs to the public forces scholars to think more deeply about what such value was. An invaluable support to this effort is to identify the value the same sign has for contemporary people [25].

3.3 Flow

In the 1970s Csikszentmihalyi identified the concept of 'flow' as being an optimal experience, an emotional satisfying state of consciousness, arrived at when an individual is completely involved in an activity. The defining feature of flow is an intense experiential involvement in a moment-to-moment activity. [26]. Although an experience of flow is rare in everyday life, almost any activity can produce 'flow' if certain conditions are met:

- the activity one engages in contains a clear set of goals
- a sense that one is engaging in challenges at a level appropriate to one's capacities. The perceived challenges and skills are well matched. If challenges exceed skills one becomes anxious. If skills exceed challenges one relaxes and becomes bored

- flow depends on the presence of immediate feedback about the progress that is being made in order to adjust behaviour and stay in flow.

Clear goals, optimal challenges and clear, immediate feedback are necessary features of an activity that promotes the intrinsically rewarding experiential involvement that characterizes flow [26].

The experience of flow produces feelings of enjoyment and pleasure which make the experience intrinsically rewarding and therefore the person is likely to remember it more fully and he will also be more likely to seek such experiences more often [27].

Under certain conditions and depending on the individual's history with the activity, an individual can find flow in almost any activity, also visiting a cultural heritage site. It is the subjective challenges and skills that influence the quality of a person's experience [28].

How a person feels while acting tends to be ignored. Yet individuals constantly evaluate their quality of experience and often will decide to continue or terminate a given behaviour based on their evaluations. Research suggests that the experience of flow is a powerful motivating force. When individuals are fully involved in an activity, they tend to find the activity enjoyable and intrinsically rewarding. The motivation to persist in or return to an activity arises out of the experience itself. We can come to experience a new activity as intrinsically rewarding if we find flow in it [26].

3.4 Experience sampling method

This study suggests using the experience sampling method (ESM) to evaluate people's experiences while visiting an archaeological site. Although no single person can be credited with inventing the empirical method referred to as the experience sampling method, the methodology that most resembles its current form is credited to Csikszentmihalyi et al. [26]. Experience sampling allows researchers to study the experiences of individuals in the moment they occur. The method involves having respondents answer questions about their thoughts, feelings and activities, within the context of their everyday life. Experience sampling enables analyzing the quality of experience individuals have while engaging in an activity. The researcher comes to understanding how individuals evaluate their interactions with the environment.

4 Research

The increasing interest of the public for archaeology urged archaeologist in Flanders, as elsewhere in the Western World, to collaborate with historians, museum curators, exhibit designers and other experts in heritage management to develop strategies for translating the increasing amount of information for the public. Save a few exceptions, these efforts all concentrate on off-site presentation of archaeological heritage in museums and theme-parks. Investigations of archaeological heritage almost always coincide with environmental planning. Excavations must be carried out promptly, in function



of new development taking the place of archaeological remains. Therefore the presentation of archaeological heritage in situ remains exceptional.

A specific feature that site managers have to deal with when making sites accessible is the discrepancy between what visitors expect when visiting an archaeological site and what sites really have to offer. The image people have of archaeological sites is mostly based on their experiences with archaeological remains in the Mediterranean and stand in huge contrast with the archaeological evidence in situ in Flanders, which consist mainly of landmarks such as tumuli, remains of early medieval strongholds and occasionally the site of an abandoned abbey or the ruins of a church. This is what R. Joyce called the tension between monumentality, the material condition assumed in cultural heritage – and the trace – archaeological materiality that is more subtle, a trace of past human presence in a landscape [30].

Because of this more subtle and contextual character the archaeological heritage in situ does not function as an ‘icon’, since the essential feature of an icon is that its recognizable and induces a sense of familiarity. Given the lack of visual recognition visitors are unable to make the connection between what they see and what the remains represent. This is where interpretation and presentation appear on the scene. They have to be conceived in such way that the visitor is able to read the signs and understand the value of the ancient signs as well as the value the same signs have for contemporary people. Interpretation and presentation have to take into account convention (the way object and sign are connected by culture or convention), experience (the connection between sign and concept, the collateral experience of the person) and perception (the way a person understands the sign depending on previous experiences, prior knowledge and the context of the sign). Only then will interpretation and presentation enable a meaningful relationship between the sign (the archaeological heritage) and the object (the past society).

Based on the studies by Poria, Biran and Reichel who distinguished three groups of visitors – those who expect to feel the heritage, those who expect to learn and those who expect other experiences – this study suggests that presentations of archaeological on-site heritage should focus on the emotional elements of people’s experiences. Since flow is a powerful motivating force this is what a presentation of heritage should try to achieve. Visiting heritage on site while experiencing flow makes the experience intrinsically rewarding and therefore the visitor will remember the visit more fully and he is more likely to seek such experience again. The flow experience becomes a force for expanding the visitor’s interests and interpretation becomes a means of enhancing the emotional involvement with the site.

5 Conclusion and future research

The ICOMOS Charter for the interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage sites (2008) declares that “Effective interpretation and presentation should enhance personal experience, increase public respect and understanding, and communicate the importance of the conservation of cultural heritage sites.”



We should, however, not only ask the question concerning the traditional meaning of archaeological heritage, the historical, cultural and socio-cultural point of view, because these are the intrinsic values, but also concerning the perception and the experience in the actual and future social, cultural and creative appreciation, the extrinsic values. The latter include the profits of the conservation of urban heritage for the society in the actual and future perspective. In this context, we refer to the 'executive convention concerning the contribution of cultural heritage to the society', the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society by the Council of Europe which was accepted in 2005. Hence, cultural heritage is approached as a dynamic and integral theme that is anchored spatially, and that can provide a contribution to reach other social goals and improve the quality of life.

The opening-up and management of heritage in a sustainable way must be realized together with the consultation of the users, the inhabitants and the public. This is visualized in the heritage cycle. "*The Heritage Cycle diagram gives an idea of how we can make the past part of our future*" [31]. First, people have to understand the cultural site before they can appreciate and evaluate it. When people appreciate a site, they also want to take care of the site and so this will result in enjoying it and with enjoying comes a thirst to understand and so the process will start again.

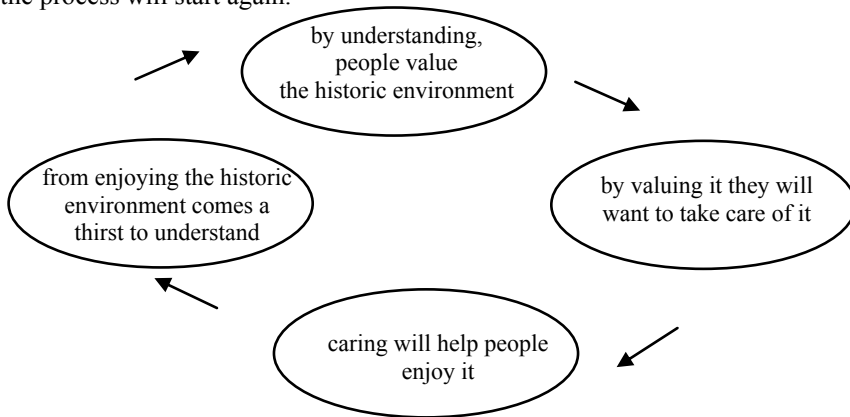


Figure 2: The heritage cycle diagram [31].

By recognizing the importance of the relationship between a sign and its object, as conceived in the semiotic model of C.S. Peirce, interpretation becomes an instrument that reveals experiences and associations. This way a sensorial layer is added to the presentation. Interpretation and presentation no longer just focus on the cognitive aspect of visiting on-site archaeological heritage.

In the spring of 2011 an experience-sampling study to highlight this approach will be launched on two sites with similar archaeological remains in Flanders: the Iron age burial mounds of Peer and Meeuwen-Gruitrode. In Peer the site is made accessible only by means of an interpretive sign. At the archaeological

park 'De Rieten' in Meeuwen-Gruitrode the burial mounds, smoothed down as time went by, where remodelled with sand and overgrown with heather. Information concerning the archaeological heritage is provided through interpretive signs on site. A trail of stones leads the visitor from the entrance of the park to the site of the burial mounds. The stones are inscribed with a date or event and act as a time machine. One of the burial mounds is shown in cross-section. Some of the participants will visit the site in Peer first, while others will start at the archaeological park in Meeuwen-Gruitrode. The aim of the experience-sampling study is to find out in what way a more elaborate interpretation of a site influences the emotional involvement and what a presentation should look like to enable the visitor to achieve flow.

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