Some Background Musings on the Need for an ICOMOS–Ename Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites

Gustavo Araoz

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Interpretation of a heritage site much is more that just telling a story to the visitors and the public. Interpretation is the process and the tools through which the full significance and values attributed to a place are transmitted to the public, and in that sense, they become the justification for its preservation. For forty years, ICOMOS and the international heritage community have managed to get by without any detailed guidance on how to articulate a site's significance to the general public, or in other words, how to interpret a heritage site. Why suddenly now does ICOMOS feel that we need a new doctrinal document, a new set of ethical principles for the interpretation of sites? I might venture four interconnected reasons for your consideration and discussion.

Newer categories of heritage sites rely heavily on interpretation. It should be no secret that the more obscure, weak, or ambiguous the value of a heritage site, the greater the need for its interpretation. There was a time when most of the world's inventory of heritage sites needed little or no interpretation: the Pyramids, the Sistine Chapel, the Taj Mahal, the great cathedrals, the U.S. Capitol. They lived for many years with little or no interpretation, and their prestige was undiminished. For these iconic sites, their interpretation was tacit in their mere existence, and everyone understood that. Nonetheless, we cannot deny that interpretation has always been useful; it is the threshold to connoisseurship and to the deeper appreciation for the significance of a place, but basically, interpretation for these great iconic sites was secondary or supplemental.

As the categories of heritage have expanded over the past 40 years, we have moved to accept places on our registries whose associations with events or trends are neither well known nor understood, and whose visual subtlety, aesthetic impact, and commonality of appearance can say nothing about why a place classifies as heritage. These places need an explanation, or interpretation. Let us recall the much-disputed and misunderstood designation of the landfill in Fresno, California, as a national historic landmark a couple of years ago. The values of the site were never sufficiently well interpreted to the general public. As a result, the National Register and the national historic landmark program were publicly ridiculed for elevating a landfill to heritage status. The interpretation that the public did not hear is that this site was judged by experts to be of extraordinary significance as a technical victory in regenerating an awful place, and as a symbol of the ability of a community to deal successfully with a big environmental problem.

The public demands and expects the theme park experience. The theme park experience has had a profound effect on the way that heritage sites are presented and interpreted to the public. This is nothing new, because some adhere to the idea that the heritage community invented the theme park to begin with: in Williamsburg in the United States, and in the outdoor architectural museums of Scandinavia. This strange creature that sprang from our midst is now a huge competitor with the heritage industry in attracting visitors, with perhaps the most ironic example of all being Busch Gardens sapping the lifeblood out of the very ancestor that provided the DNA for its own existence: nearby Colonial Williamsburg. This reminds me of the Spanish proverb that warns against breeding crows, because they will pluck your eyes. As theme parks vie with heritage sites in ever-more ferocious competition to capture our nation's leisure time, an alarming number of heritage sites have adopted the ways of mass entertainment to meet the expectations of the average visitor. This has inherent dangers, since to entertain effectively, entertainment must avoid uncomfortable topics and limit mental challenges so as not to disturb visitors who are on automatic pilot.

The development of modern interpretation technologies is accelerating. Closely associated to the theme park syndrome is the application of modern technologies to interpretation. While it is obvious that virtual realities can be a great tool to interpret a heritage site with minimal impact on its historic fabric, they can begin to render the site itself secondary to the virtual experience, especially as the sensorial stimulation of virtual realities continues to increase. In his *Travels into Hyper Reality*, the Italian author and semiotist Umberto Eco pointed out how the fake reality river jungle cruise in Disneyland is better than actually going down the real Nile. In Disneyland you are guaranteed that the hippo will always yawn as you sail by, while in the real Nile, the hippos may be elsewhere the day you are there. When fake reality or virtual reality becomes more satisfying than "real reality," a heritage site may be viewed as disposable, and its conservation optional.

Interpretation as entertainment also tends towards heavy-handed techniques that are meant to capture and retain visitors with low attention spans for as long as possible. The technology, infrastructure, and hardware for such presentations have disfigured many heritage sites, diminished the quality of the visit, and often become more important than the site itself. When interpretation relies more on contrived designs, awesome reconstructions, and elaborate programs than on the extant historical evidence, the limits of interpretive propriety have been exceeded.

Heritage has undergone a process of democratization. In an increasingly open society, heritage sites have been appropriated by multiple stakeholder groups, all of them demanding that their story be heard. At one time, not too long ago, the significance of our heritage sites was largely validated by the whole of society, or, at the very least, the uniform acceptance of its universalized value went largely unquestioned.

The Ename Charter addresses the ethics of this process head on. But I, personally, do not know where this approach will take us. If we are to be truly fair and democratic, where are the limits for allowing all self-defined stakeholders to have their say in the process of interpretation? Today the New Age people are given access to Chaco Canyon, and the neo-Druids to Stonehenge. Where do we stop? Or do we stop at all? Can we or should we expect the Ku Klux Klan to have their say in the Martin Luther King memorial sites? Or the British Royal Family at Independence Hall in Philadelphia to explain why we would be better off today as Crown Colonies? Or the Native Americans in Plymouth Rock to tell us how the advent of Europeans led to genocide? Or the protestants in Vatican City to tell us of the Catholic Church's abuse of temporal powers? Or the neo-Nazis at Auschwitz? The Japanese in Pearl Harbor? Pentagon representatives in Hiroshima? The Mexicans at the Alamo? These are questions that demand an answer.

There was a time when each heritage site had an associated significance that was deeply rooted in the public mind, or at least in certain sectors of the public mind. There was little doubt about what made a place valuable to society. Whatever interpretation was provided used those well-known stories and often searched for related new ones simply to increase visitors' awareness and appreciation of the official values attributed to the site.

Today, however, this is often reversed: instead of a site with an attached story or stories, there are many stories in search of a heritage site that will validate the ideas, beliefs, or interpretations of history that are behind them. This is what makes the process of identifying, registering, and even preserving a site eminently political. And the great danger with this is that behind the interpretation of these stories in search of a site there is a political or an ideological agenda waiting to be proselytized.

This is nothing new. What is new is the level of intensity with which sites are being identified as bridges to political power. From Ruskin using heritage to reverse the effects of the industrial revolution, to Viollet-le-Duc trying to sell the superiority of French medieval expression, or to Ann Pamela Cunningham using Mount Vernon to foster the deification of George Washington and the ideas he was thought to stand for, heritage has always been a political tool to advance public adherence to certain ideals, beliefs, and even myths. Heritage sites always mean something much bigger than their mere architectural accomplishments. In principle, the inscription of a site in the official registers and inventories means that enough people are buying into it such that they agree on the values attributed to the place and are willing to extend to it all the legal benefits inherent in official protection. Correspondingly, many traditionally disenfranchised minority groups feel the need to identify heritage sites and secure for them official recognition for self-validation and public recognition of their right to be a player in the public arena. To do this, they have to link their arguments to a heritage site.

The problem is that precisely because they have been disenfranchised, many of these groups never had or were never given the opportunity to shape and mark the landscape in a way that we could easily identify as traditional heritage. To a certain degree, this is why the concept of heritage has had to expand to cultural landscapes, to natural places with sacred meanings, and to places where historic events of significance only to some disenfranchised group took place. To the general public, these heritage sites are “new” in the sense that they have navigated through history anonymously and out of the public consciousness, without any patrimonial recognition, at times even by the very group that now claims it. It is only when a specific or emerging vision of history needs validation, and a solid connection is made between a place and a given message, that suddenly it metamorphoses into heritage. Then the message attributed to the site needs to be disseminated broadly—interpreted—to gather sufficient support for its public recognition.

Such sites present a challenge inasmuch as once the match between message and site is achieved, its significance is at risk of being limited to the single value of the one group that identified it, which would easily convert interpretation into propaganda, be it religious, political, or social. This is why the Ename Charter insists that the whole process of identification, recognition, and preservation form part of the interpretive program of a site. Simple decency and honesty demand that the public know who values the site and why.

These are just some of the pitfalls that can befall us in the process of interpretation. There are many others, of course, which the Ename Charter addresses, such as interpretive technology so advanced that it cannot be properly maintained; interpretative programs that are beyond the site’s budget; and even the old-fashioned exhibit design. I urge you to read the charter and think about it with care. Over the next three years, US/ICOMOS, in partnership with the Ename Center in Belgium, will continue to discuss and refine it. The members of ICOMOS will be given opportunities for workshops and participation in the drafting of the final texts. At present, we foresee the adoption of a final text on interpretation at our general assembly in Quebec in 2008.

To conclude, we can summarize the intent of the Ename Charter as fourfold: one, to protect the physical integrity and authenticity of heritage sites; second, to ensure that all aspects of a site’s significance are impartially made known to visitors; third, to prevent its significance from being used for propagandistic aims; and lastly, to ensure an ethical, professional approach to heritage interpretation. If these four principles were clear in our minds, we might not need the Ename Charter.

Gustavo Araoz, US/ICOMOS (U.S. National Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites), 401 F Street NW, Suite 331, Washington, D.C. 20001; garaoz@usicomos.org