

Identifying and Protecting the Interpretive Potential of Setting at Cultural Heritage Sites

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Introduction

THE INTERPRETIVE POWER OF SETTING IS PARTICULARLY IMPORTANT for cultural heritage sites such as ancient ruins. Most protected areas must sooner or later contend with increasing external and internal development pressures, which tend to be particularly intense at smaller, near-urban cultural sites. The level of restoration within a site as well as the types of land use and human activity adjacent to the site can affect its interpretive potential, which might be defined as: the best possible physical, social, cultural, and historical milieu for transmitting and receiving the emotional and intellectual meanings of a place. The themes and messages of programmatic interpretation are derived from the setting. Nature, landscape features, human works—past and present—work together as a *de facto* form of interpretive media that protect the *genius loci*, or spirit of the place, and provide a wider diversity of possible interpretive messages and experience opportunities. Visitors experience a seamless landscape that is both within and adjacent to the site. Some combination of setting attributes that optimize interpretive potential can be recognized and planned for. Interpreters can provide information essential to the planning process that is typically lacking.

There is a variety of opinions on how cultural sites and their surroundings should be developed. It is worth asking how altering internal and external setting attributes will affect interpretive potential, the quality of the visitor experience, and, ultimately, the sustainability of the site. We know that visitor expectations about a site shape the experience they have there (Burde and Mayer 1996; Knudson et al. 2003). Paint peeling off the walls in a visitor center or museum may signal lack of maintenance or institutional financial difficulties, but visitors to an abandoned mining camp in a U.S. park or to a Mayan ruin in Mexico or Central America expect and even want to see things in a state of abandonment and disrepair and

being reclaimed by nature. This juxtaposition of restored ruins and those being reclaimed by nature allows the visitor to ponder the relationship between humans and nature—a much-needed analysis in today's world. As the level of internal restoration passes some optimal point, and urbanization or land use intensifies near a cultural site, there appears to be a concomitant decline in charm, authenticity and interpretive potential from the visitor's point of view (Figure 1).

The case of Copan Ruins

At Copan Archaeological Park and World Heritage site in Honduras, most visitors currently leave the town of Copan



Figure 1. Photo taken from inside Pizza Hut illustrates how the level of development on adjacent lands threatens experiences available at UNESCO World Heritage sites such as the Pyramids of Giza, Egypt. Photo by Adam Bernstein.

Ruins and walk through a pastoral landscape for 15 minutes before reaching the park. Along the way, they witness a mixture of small-scale farming and remnant woodlands not too far removed from the Mayan agricultural landscape of the past and one which is cultivated by descendants of the ancient Maya that built the pyramids, stela, and ball courts within the park (Figure 2). Some un-restored ruins are visible en route. Once inside the park, one finds a visitor center replete with exhibitions as well as trails allowing one to walk among skillfully restored ruins and interpretative sites. Nearby are un-restored areas where one can wander by ruins with trees growing on top of ancient mounds or past carved stone inextricably tangled with roots and vines. In these areas, an abundance of birds, reptiles, bats, and insects make their home and deer

browse early and late, adding another dimension to the experience. The interpretive potential of Copan emanates from all of these settings. This became apparent while conducting several studies that asked visitors to evaluate current and future management scenarios advocated by some archeologists, and officials in the town of Copan Ruins. Visitors responded to questions about tree removal, increased restoration of ruins, and the expansion of the town of Copan Ruins and placement of tourist accommodations closer to the park, among others (Mayer and Wallace 2007, 2008).

The land around the site primes the experience

Results from the studies indicated that the external setting at Copan is a transition zone between modernity and antiquity that



Figure 2. The external setting of Copan Archaeological Park, Honduras, with scenes ranging from reforestation and agriculture to residences and businesses such as modest and luxury hotels. Visitors appreciated a green buffer of farm and forest between the park the nearby town.

primes the visitor experience by increasing the sense of anticipation and stimulating inquiry. It provides raw material for interpretive themes, which are tied to the “extant” natural and cultural contexts present since the time the ancient civilization thrived. The setting affords visitors an opportunity to better understand local history and to envision the scope and scale of the area—thereby providing context and extending the experience. The Copan studies and other related studies in Mesoamerica suggest that when adjacent landscapes give way to hotels, vendors, and automobiles, there is often a sharpening of both ecological and aesthetic gradients and a loss of context that reduces the effective size of the area and the breadth of available experience opportunities (Wallace et al. 2005).

Restoration can create or remove interpretive potential

At Copan as well as many other cultural sites, it is common to find those who feel that more restoration will attract more

tourists. There are, however, positive and negative consequences of restoring ruins and increasing tourism at cultural sites. The welcome consequences include increased understanding and local economic activity (Pedersen 2003). Many ruins are enigmatic, having been reclaimed by nature or severely deteriorated; they are, therefore, rendered more comprehensible by some degree of restoration. Once some mounds at Copan are restored, it allows the mind’s eye to see beneath other un-restored mounds. A negative consequence of restorations is that they initiate an accelerated rate of physical deterioration of a non-renewable resource once exposed to the natural elements, sunlight, and rain. New restorations can also dramatically add to the fixed cost of operation, to the need to increase staff presence, and to monitor. An overemphasis on tourism volume can lead to unjustified reconstructions (Feilden and Jokilehto 1998). Sustainable visitation in Copan was linked to the maintenance of setting integrity by visitors. They indicated that having both restored and un-



Figure 3. The internal setting of Copan Archaeological Park, Honduras, with scenes ranging from non-restored to totally restored ruins. Visitors appreciated aspects of each level of restoration.

restored ruins helped to define the essence of a *ruins*; it provided them access to a longer historical period, provoked reflection about sustainability, and helped to retain the mystery and enchantment of that which is still undiscovered (Mayer et al. 2007; Figure 3). The combined setting also provided a wider diversity of visitor experiences. The un-restored areas in this relatively small park were seen as more hospitable and relaxing, and the trees, natural vegetation, and fauna permitted nature observation to be integrated into the cultural experience.

Identifying interpretive potential

The interpretive potential inherent in the settings at Copan began to emerge as the visitor perceptions about internal and external development were probed. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, and participant observation were used with more than 600 visitors and local residents over two years to better understand the experiences and settings that visitors were seeking and to test

how proposed changes to external and internal settings would affect the visitor experience. Most of the people who visited Copan were well-educated, motivated, and predisposed to learn. Salient experience outcomes sought by visitors included being able to imagine Copan at its zenith, to better understand ancient and contemporary Mayan culture, to learn through observation, and to have some opportunities for solitude and reflection. The hundreds of specific comments gathered and categorized slowly helped us to develop the concept of interpretive potential inherent in specific settings at Copan (Mayer et al. 2008). As a result, we suggest that similar and less complex studies are one means of uncovering the interpretive potential of any cultural site.

The interpretive potential of setting is not an entirely new idea. Tilden (1968) acknowledged that a well-preserved monument “speaks for itself” but does so partially in a language not understood by all visitors, thus requiring the help of interpreters

to “give life to the ideas and images of material remains” (Silberman 2006). Others have long acknowledged that protected area visitors seek out the settings that will make the achievement of desired experience outcomes more likely (Manning 1999). Since the 1970s, it has been suggested that to optimize visitor experience satisfaction, protected area managers should understand visitor motives, provide some diversity of management zones, and pay attention to the integrity of setting of each (Brown et al. 1978; Clark and Stankey 1979). If the Copan studies are any indication, the link between setting and experience quality is pronounced for cultural sites and the notion of “well preserved” requires attention to the combination of both internal and external settings and the interpretive potential they hold—and which could be lost otherwise.

Participation in site and local planning

The internal setting integrity and the interpretive potential that Copan currently holds can only be protected during the planning process. Likewise, maintaining the favorable external setting is dependent on land use decisions made by local or regional jurisdictions on lands outside the protected area. Even in the case of Copan, where there is a designated buffer zone where managers are legally enabled to participate in local land use decision-making, the case for the importance of setting has not been advanced by interpreters. Interpreters have traditionally had a limited role in the development of management plans and only vary rarely, if at all, are assigned to provide information to local government land use decision-makers. Recent U.S. National Park Service planning models, such as the Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP)

framework, do include the identification of important interpretive themes as a part of the planning process. In general, however, interpreters focus on designing interpretive programs, media, exhibits, and publications for delivery to the public.

Merriman and Brochu (2005) do suggest that interpretive planning should also encompass landscape features. They advocate examining the “mechanics” that influence the visitor experience, such as how the site, facilities, and interpretation “work together to create design balance and physical spaces that function as well as look good” (p. 44).

The expanded role of interpreters and interpretive planning suggested here goes a step further. It asks that interpreters now become more involved in site and local land use planning as they are the ones best able to provide a voice for the importance of setting and appropriate levels of internal and external development. When planned for and optimized, setting can both serve as interpretive media in and of itself as well as being the source “from which” traditional interpretation arises.

Both internal and external development pressures must be addressed by zoning (which prescribes the type and intensity of use), design standards, and performance criteria. Maintaining or enhancing external setting compatibility is likely to require a combination of land use regulations and incentives for adjacent landowners. Testimony from interpreters about the interpretive themes that particular settings provide and the relation of setting to experience quality and sustainable visitation can be compelling to planners and decision-makers who must make controversial decisions about land use.

What happens during site and regional

planning largely determines the extent to which interpreters can later practice their art. This form of interpretive planning is proactive and might be thought of as “experience design” that is informed by visitor research. To suggest that the conscious planning for, or design of, setting is a form of interpretation by no means reduces the importance of the programmatic efforts that follow. Interpreters might, as a part of programmatic efforts, preface the description of specific interpretive themes and activities

with supporting information from visitors about the experiences and settings they seek. Cultural heritage sites such as Copan are often magnets for unplanned development. Interpreters are a voice for the resource; they must now use that voice—along with those of archeologists and other professionals, site managers, and local communities—during the planning process and beyond to inform the day-to-day management decisions that affect settings and their interpretive potential.

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