Training and Professionalisation in

Heritage Interpretation

Challenges and Future Directions

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Training and Professionalisation in Heritage Interpretation: Challenges and Future Directions

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Content

Editorial Introduction: Training and Professionalisation in Heritage Interpretation

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Introduction

It is with great pleasure that we present this volume of proceedings from the international conference Training and Professionalisation in Heritage Interpretation: Challenges and Future Directions, held 26–27 May 2025 at University of Gothenburg. Over two days, more than one hundred participants from Europe, Africa, and Asia met on site and online to exchange experiences, test new ideas, and reflect on heritage interpretation.

The programme offered seven thematic sessions, keynote lectures, and nearly forty presentations covering topics such as digital innovation, community engagement, decolonisation, youth participation, and sustainability in heritage interpretation and tourism. The diversity of contributions underlined not only the global relevance of the field but also the varied understandings of heritage interpretation itself, creating a valuable platform for dialogue across disciplines and geographies.

The TEHIC Project

The conference marked the end of the Erasmus+ project Towards a European Heritage Interpretation Curriculum (TEHIC, 2022–2025). The project was coordinated by the University of Gothenburg and its Centre for Critical Heritage Studies and Centre for Tourism, in collaboration with the Asociación para la Interpretación del Patrimonio and On Projects Advising SL (Spain), MAPA das Ideias (Portugal), the University of Education Freiburg (Germany), the University of Zagreb (Croatia), and the Instituto Andaluz del Patrimonio Histórico (Spain). It set out to address a clear gap in European higher education: the absence of a standardised curriculum in heritage interpretation, despite the essential role of interpreters in making cultural and natural heritage meaningful and relevant.

TEHIC’s aim was to strengthen the recognition and professionalisation of heritage interpreters by developing a European-level curriculum at master’s level, aligned with EQF level 7, and by creating flexible, open-access training opportunities. Academic and

professional expertise were combined to ensure that the materials reflected both rigorous research and the practical needs of the field.

Among its main results are a Good Practices Manual with 14 case studies, a comprehensive postgraduate curriculum with learning units, and a freely accessible Massive Open Online Course (MOOC), available at https://tehic.eu. Together, these outputs provide a framework for building competencies, raising awareness of the value of heritage, and equipping a new generation of interpreters to meet global challenges.

Figure 1. Representatives from the TEHIC team gathered in Freiburg, October 2024. Source: TEHIC

Keynotes and Conference Themes

The keynote lectures highlighted both innovation and reflection. The TEHIC team presented the project's outcomes, including the Good Practices Manual, Curriculum, and MOOC. Jonas Myrstrand (Studio Jox, Gothenburg) showed how virtual reality can bring Gothenburg's urban heritage and shipyards to life. Linn Björk, Märta Gustafsson, and Jessica Bergström (Innovatum Science Center and Västra Götaland Region's Cultural Administration) invited participants to rethink established routines through their contribution *If It Ain't Broken, Break It*, presenting a practice-oriented approach that uses co-creation, experimentation, and hands-on exercises to make interpretation accessible for small museums and volunteer-based heritage organisations. Eva Sandberg (Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) reflected on fifteen years of nature interpretation in Sweden and beyond, while Darko Babić and Helena Stublić (University of Zagreb) examined the overlaps and divergences between museum studies and heritage interpretation.

Beyond the keynotes, contributions clustered around seven themes: urban heritage and social inclusion; youth engagement and innovative learning; controversy and interdisciplinary negotiation; community-driven interpretation; decolonisation and global perspectives; heritage interpretation in museums; and digital innovations and storytelling.

General Reflections and Emergent Themes

Several overarching lessons about Heritage Interpretation emerged. Inclusion was repeatedly emphasised as vital: working with diverse communities, perspectives, and sites strengthens heritage interpretation and demonstrates its wide applicability. Critical perspectives encouraged participants to question established narratives, highlight underrepresented voices, and engage with contested pasts. Many also stressed the need for clearer terminology and stronger theoretical foundations. Above all, professionalisation and training remain urgent, equipping interpreters with the skills needed to address global challenges ranging from sustainability to social cohesion. These priorities align closely with the professional agenda advanced by Interpret Europe, which has contributed substantially to competence frameworks that TEHIC builds upon in its curriculum and training materials.

Conceptual Roots and Recent Developments of Heritage Interpretation

Freeman Tilden's "Interpreting Our Heritage" (1957) remains an influential reference point in international discussions of heritage interpretation, and several authors in this volume explicitly draw on his work. His principles align closely with constructivist theories of learning, and he argues that interpretation should build on visitors' prior knowledge, reveal meaning rather than transmit facts, provoke reflection, present coherent wholes, and adapt to different audiences. Similar ideas emerged independently in other contexts around the same time. Arthur Hazelius' work at Skansen in the late 19th century, later examined by scholars such as Sten Rentzhog (2008), emphasised identification, emotional resonance, and embodied experience (experience-based pedagogy) as key to public engagement.

Heritage interpretation also intersects with long-established pedagogical traditions in museums and the heritage sector, including museum education, heritage education, art education, and conservation education. These fields share core commitments to meaning-making, dialogue, participation, and experiential learning. These are values that strongly overlap with those articulated within interpretation, even where the term itself has not been widely used. Interpretation can therefore be understood as an overarching framework that draws together and gives language to these related practices, with a shared focus on intentional, inclusive, and ethically aware communication and practice, using the past in the present.

A recent contribution to this expanding conceptual landscape is UNESCO WHIPIC's guidance *Identifying Values and Attributes for Heritage Interpretation* (2024). Here, interpretation is defined as a meaning-making process grounded in communication, participation, and experience, and the report emphasises the ethical, people-centred, and values-based foundations of interpretive work in conservation and heritage practices. The guidance offers an international reference point that complements the pedagogical and museological traditions discussed above and provides an important conceptual tool for training and professionalisation in the field of conservation. These developments contribute to a shared view of heritage interpretation as an intentional, inclusive, values-based, and iterative process rooted in both long-standing pedagogical traditions and emerging international frameworks.

Definition of Heritage Interpretation According to TEHIC

TEHIC builds on this broad foundation, situating interpretation within a holistic approach that integrates pedagogical, communicative, and ethical dimensions already deeply embedded in museums and heritage organisations. In TEHIC, heritage interpretation is defined as a *creative process of strategic communication that forges intellectual and emotional connections between people and heritage resources, enabling them to create their own meanings.* More than transmitting knowledge, heritage interpretation is about fostering understanding, appreciation, and protection. It is always intentional, participatory, and value-based, and it can be seen as a full process of defining, packaging, communicating, and receiving meaning.

Because all these steps involve choices about what to highlight, how to frame it, and for whom, interpretation also carries an inherent ethical dimension. Interpreters must be aware of the perspectives they foreground, the voices they include or overlook, and the impact their choices have on how heritage is understood and used. Ethical reflection is therefore not an added step but embedded in the interpretive process itself, shaping how meanings are defined and how connections are facilitated.

Within this framework, storytelling is not a separate activity but a natural expression of the "connections" that interpretation aims to create. These connections often take narrative form, whether spoken, performed, or co-created, making stories both a method and an outcome of strategic communication. Storytelling translates meanings into forms that can be shared, felt, and experienced, helping audiences relate heritage to their own lives.

Papers in this Volume

The contributions collected here approach heritage interpretation from many angles. Drawing on the TEHIC framework, we use the themes of *defining, packaging, communicating,* and *receiving* to make sense of this diversity.

Defining / Understanding

This stage concerns how heritage is identified, framed, critically engaged with and connected to wider concepts such as memory, identity, mobility, or sustainability. It is about asking what counts as heritage, for whom, and why.

Darko Babić and Helena Stublić examine heritage interpretation as a discipline, comparing it with museum studies and underlining the need for clearer conceptual boundaries. Eva Sandberg reflects on fifteen years of nature interpretation at the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation, showing how traditions of participation and sustainability can enrich the broader conceptual foundations of heritage interpretation. Other papers bring this question into lived contexts. Rim Menia highlights everyday architecture in North Africa, often neglected in official frameworks, and shows how participatory workshops can reframe such buildings as part of a living heritage. Giovanna Del Gobbo, Sofia Marconi, and Elisa Desii focused on community activation processes promoted by a thematic museum network, which encouraged the reinterpretation of cultural heritage and supported the development of a sense of belonging and new skills for both museum professionals and the public. Alina Kalachyov, meanwhile, argues that migrants in so-called “transit countries” act as interpreters of heritage, expanding the frame of who is recognised in cultural memory and identity. Both contributions underline that defining heritage is never neutral, but always relational and political.

Packaging / Storytelling

This stage is about shaping meanings into narratives, performances, or formats that can be shared - the creative act of turning heritage into story.

Several papers illustrate how storytelling can make complex histories accessible. Gizella Börcsök’s Sacred Past project demonstrates how guided tours of Gothic churches in the Carpathian Basin can weave together history, architecture, and community perspectives. Maria Elvira Lezcano explores contested urban space in A Coruña through theatre, walks, and performances that bring to light histories of displacement and resistance. Majcherczyk Misza uses educational live-action role play at the Royal Court in Wawel to transform history into participatory narratives, highlighting the playful and reflective potential of roleplay as interpretation. Others experiment with more collaborative or unconventional methods. Linn

Björk, Jessica Bergström, and Märta Gustavsson invite participants in small museums to co-create heritage stories through playful workshops. Smaranda Spanu and Dana Dragoș reframe librarianship as heritage, packaging everyday professional practices into digital narratives that highlight identity and memory. Supriya Kamshetty focuses on the Pattada Mancha, a ritual chair used in South India, showing how material culture itself becomes a living story. Finally, Eleni Koumpouzi and Katarzyna Kosmala present a youth boatbuilding project in Glasgow, where skills, identities, and histories are literally constructed into a shared narrative.

These contributions show that packaging heritage is never simply about presenting facts but rather about crafting formats and stories that connect emotionally, intellectually, and often collaboratively with audiences.

Communicating

This stage concerns the delivery of interpretation - how stories are conveyed through media, spaces, performances, or technologies.

Lisa Östman and Lena Mellbratt-Stenman show how school architecture in Sweden has embodied shifting attitudes toward children with intellectual disabilities, illustrating how design itself can communicate values of exclusion or inclusion. Zhenyu Li and Xiaofeng Li introduce the concept of scenescape in Chinese traditional settlements, emphasising the sensory and spatial dimensions of interpretation, where sound, movement, and atmosphere shape visitor experience. Brinda Gaitonde Nayak experiments with hybrid teaching in Mumbai, combining digital platforms, heritage walks, and mapping technologies to communicate conservation knowledge in engaging, place-based ways.

These papers highlight that communication in heritage interpretation is not only about transmitting content, but also about creating spaces and experiences that allow diverse audiences, students and communities to encounter heritage in immersive and meaningful ways.

Receiving

This stage highlights the role of audiences and communities in interpretation - through co-creation, feedback, participation, and the ways people engage with or contest heritage.

Héctor Manuel Aliaga de Miguel and María García-Hernández show how residents in Madrid’s Usera and Villaverde districts redefine industrial sites, working-class traditions, and migrant histories as meaningful heritage, reframing narratives from the ground up. AlAnood AlShaikh examines how heritage practitioners in the United Arab Emirates challenge official narratives by drawing on tribal traditions, producing heritage that is negotiated rather than

imposed. Farhad Nazir and Carlos Alberto Patiño Romaris explores how Muslim communities in Swat, Pakistan, reinterpret Buddhist remains by weaving them into their own cultural narratives, turning archaeology into living heritage. Shahim Abdurahiman focuses on Kerala, where urban communities reinterpret their cityscapes through everyday practices and memories, demonstrating how reception strengthens community agency. These contributions show that audiences are not passive recipients but active participants in creating significance, and that heritage interpretation becomes most powerful when meaning is shared, contested, and reshaped in dialogue with communities.

Key Insights from the Papers

Taken together, the papers in this volume confirm TEHIC's central point: heritage interpretation may sometimes be *used* in a single act of explanation or display, for example, a workshop, a guided tour or a digital feature. However, it cannot be reduced to such instances. Rather, it is a comprehensive process that moves between defining, packaging, communicating, and receiving, each stage strategic and ethical, and all interconnected.

Several contributions stress that defining heritage is never neutral but always political and relational, shaped by communities and practitioners as much as by institutions. Others show that storytelling remains at the heart of interpretation, whether through theatre, ritual objects, or experimental workshops, and that stories are powerful tools for opening up contested or silenced pasts. The papers on communicating show how methods and media matter: from architecture to augmented reality, scenescapes to hybrid teaching, each delivery channel influences how heritage is experienced. Finally, the work on receiving highlights that audiences are not passive: they co-create meaning, reinterpret narratives, and embed heritage in their own everyday lives.

The overarching lesson is that heritage interpretation is most vital when it is inclusive, participatory, and reflexive, and when it recognises multiple voices and encourages dialogue. Yet this also points to a missing dimension: the need for a shared theoretical and self-reflexive framework. Practitioners and researchers must define where they stand in this process, be explicit about their interpretive positions, the values they bring, and the conceptual lenses through which they work. Developing such awareness, alongside TEHIC's practical framework, is essential for building a discipline that is not only skilled but also critically and ethically grounded. All aspects of the process of defining, packaging, communicating, and receiving, are already present to varying degrees in existing Higher Education curricula around the world. What TEHIC contributes is a more systematic framework that connects these elements and insists on treating interpretation as a

comprehensive process rather than as isolated practices. By making these positions explicit, higher education and professional training can build not only technical expertise but also the critical and ethical awareness needed for heritage interpretation to be relevant in a rapidly changing world. How far such curricula will be implemented in practice remains uncertain, but TEHIC's framework provides a clear direction for future development.

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Mar Muriel

What Heritage Interpretation Studies Could Learn from Museum Studies

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Abstract

Heritage interpretation is not yet a scientific discipline, nor is it well established as a field of study within universities. This lack of institutional grounding hinders the professional recognition of heritage interpreters and limits fair remuneration for their work. Although interpretation draws on many scientific disciplines, without developing an identity of its own it risks remaining in 'no-man's land', marginal in heritage-related processes. A precedent exists in museology/museum studies, which overcame similar challenges to gain academic legitimacy and professional status. We argue that learning from this experience could help heritage interpretation follow a similar path, achieving recognition as both a profession and a global field of study.

Introduction

Heritage interpretation is a relatively new field of study, however it can, at least partly, be traced as an idea, as we understand it today, back to the late 19th/early 20th century. Still, it is considered by many professionals working within heritage interpretation, most certainly those that clearly differentiate between practice and theory as closely connected but not identical, that the start of heritage interpretation as a field of study dates to the late 1950s when Freeman Tilden[1] defined six (still valid, timeless) principles for heritage interpretation. Tilden also offered 'dictionary relevant' explanation what heritage interpretation is in his seminal work[2], which is not to say heritage interpretation didn't exist before - it is in fact as old as humanity (Merriman and Brochu, 2006) because the human civilisation development is based on understanding: meaning explaining why something (whatsoever) exists, with what reasons, how it works, how it contributes to better level of quality of human life and so on has always been present. The only difference is that not all segments of human life are considered 'heritage', thus not necessarily considered as heritage interpretation.

Who owns Heritage

The interpretation of *oikos* – let us define oikos first: from Greek οἶκος, a term primarily referring to the house and household. The English words "ecology" and "economics" are derived from oikos, highlighting the connection between the home, its resources, and the study of how organisms interact with their environment. So, the interpretation of oikos in which humans exist, and of course including today's recognised natural and cultural heritage, has always been around. Some forms of heritage interpretation, as an activity, have continuously been a part of life, whether within local communities, or exposing not permanent members of those communities, even primarily aimed at those 'outsiders', aka today's visitors. But, already mentioned, it was only at the end of the 1950's that heritage interpretation got its name, encyclopaedic definition and principles that are (mainly) still valid today. More recently, especially in the last decade or two, heritage management partly based on the initial ideas of heritage interpretation too (Tilden's principles) strives to provide additional benefits for local communities; those communities being the true owners of heritage, and to the development of society in general (Babic, Vatan Kaptan and Masriera Esquerra, 2019).

The heritage interpretation is a useful 'tool' to educate people about importance of protection of 'recognised' heritage, and partly influence their behaviours about actual local or global scale issues: mutual tolerance (in any sense), climate changes, interdependent of humanity etc., all without intention to deliberately change behaviours (with or without any agenda), but by presenting facts and relations leaving users to make conclusions independently, so supporting foremost critical thinking. This is where heritage interpretation, or rather heritage interpretation studies often lack; not asking themselves some crucial questions, such as 'whose heritage we are discussing here', or are the real owners of heritage – this would be local communities, wherever on the globe – happy with proposed interpretation approaches, or do they have different ideas and perspectives (cf. Munjeri, 2004). The last itself opens questions about participatory heritage interpretation, something that to a certain extent exists in practice but has not been abundantly covered in (theoretical) literature. Heritage interpretation needs to leverage real owners of addressed heritage = local communities and their preferences about their own projection(s) of development. Everything else is risking leading towards conscious or unconscious (i.e. possible) manipulation. But it seems like the heritage interpretation (as a study/ies), especially that in Europe, is not embracing this fully; there is hesitance to enter these discussions, discussions which are critical for further heritage interpretation development in the true meaning of the profession.

Additionally, to deliver any kind of heritage interpretation, we firmly believe understanding what heritage itself remains crucial; sadly, none of the world scale heritage interpretation organisations[3] seem to have this high on their agenda, including here for us the most relevant Interpret Europe[4]. It opens the question 'how one does heritage interpretation, or guides others to do the interpretation of heritage' without seriously questioning what is interpreted, or more precisely what is (or is not) heritage, and why is it so. Answers to these kinds of questions seem to always come from the theory.

Why museums studies (or museology) is a recognised scientific discipline

By checking existing situation, the full question should be 'Why museums studies (or museology) is recognised scientific discipline, and heritage interpretation is still dominantly a set of standards that guide how to deliver practical work by following some theoretical postulates' (cf. Beck and Cable, 2002; Ham, 2013; Tilden, 1957 etc.).

Comparing history of heritage interpretation vs. museum practice we could notice in debates about museum related work intercession towards creating a scientific discipline. In fact, some records suggest the museum studies / museology started to develop already in 1883 when J. G. Th. von Graesse stated in his *Zeitschrift für Museologie und Antiquitätenkunde sowie verwandte Wissenschaften*:

> "If somebody had spoken or written about museology as a branch of science thirty or even twenty years ago, the only response from many people would be a compassionate, contemptuous smile, meaning that museology had acquired the status of a discipline in its own right by then. Nevertheless, after more than hundred years many workers in the museum field still reluctantly accept the idea of museology as something more than a series of practical activities." (Graesse cited in Mensch, 1992)

Some authors will (rightly) push it even more into historical perspective saying "the first museological treatise on the representation of knowledge through objects and images organised in the form of an amphitheatre" already existed from the late 16th century, where text like "Museography or Guide for the Proper Understanding and Useful Creation of Museums and Chambers of Rarities" could be dated to 1727 (Vujić, 2022, p. 219). Further on in 1753, the book *"*Instructio musei rerum naturalium"[5] was published, where Carl von Linne and David Hultman "*applied the classification of natural species to the organisation of natural scientific collections"* (Ibid, p. 219). In other words, it was a perfect time to develop the representation of knowledge through objects and images, at least in natural history museums of that time. The last is just an (initial) showcase of giving birth to a new scientific

discipline. Many other authors (e.g. Soares, 2019; Soares, 2021; Mairesse, 2015) do confirm the same, with only marginal adjustments. It is not a competition, or about who will first get there; it is much more about how to establish heritage interpretation studies, building on the experience of museum studies/museology from the past, as well as on the achievement of heritage interpretation in recent years. The goal is to make it as overarching, inclusive, and multidisciplinary as it ought to be.

Whilst the world progression is unstoppable, and undoubtable, it is not necessary in all fields: Heritage interpretation is one among (not many) where good ideas dating back as far as 2000 years ago, or 200, or even 20 years old are still valid, as far as they fit into main goals of heritage interpretation that is still valid today. The way people lived their lives in the past (and what they felt) and how they live (and what they feel) today is not significantly different. Of course, there were many changes and developments in civilization but not necessarily human feelings.

What is heritage interpretation missing to be recognised as a scientific discipline?

Museum studies/museology, initially and for now already 200+ years experienced the same questions: are we discussing a new discipline (museum studies / museology) or just a sub-study of established disciplines, such as archaeology, ethnography, natural sciences, art history or diverse technical sciences etc. P. van Mensch, one among the most prominent promoters of museology in 1992, in his PhD thesis entitled “Towards a Methodology of Museology” (Mensch, 1992) perfectly addressed it:

> “It seems that the history of museology can be described as an emancipation process involving the breaking away of museology from the subject-matter disciplines and the profiling of its own cognitive orientation and methodology. This process has been described by the Czech museologist Zbynek Stránský as a three stages development: pre-scientific, empirical descriptive, and theoretical-synthetic, or in other words: formative stage, stage of unification and synthesis and stage of maturity.” (Mensch, 1992)

The very same could be applied to today’s heritage interpretation studies (Uzzell, 2009), where it tends to develop as an independent (recognised) science, so reaching the level of the empirical descriptive and looking toward the theoretical-synthetic phase. Many other authors debating development of museology (Mensch, 1992; Mairesse, 2015; Soares, 2019; Soares, 2021; Tzortzaki, 2021; Dolák, 2022) in general are coming to the same conclusions. They agree the main reason why museology / museum studies became recognised as a scientific discipline was not a long-term history but foremost differences in between

museology and other (already affirmed) scientific disciplines. Doing museum related work (backed up by theory) and doing e.g. ethnology in a museum is just not the same thing. And just like heritage interpretation is facing now, several decades after museology / museum studies 'nailed it'.

It is worth reminding ourselves here about T. Khun's idea that the transition from the paradigmatic, pretty immature situation characterized by numerous schools of thought, each emphasizing its own approach and views as fundamental and unique (thus still separating a scientific discipline), begins at the moment when an individual or group first achieves a synthesis which could attract the majority of practitioners from the next generation (Khun, 2002).

Heritage interpretation does have some, what we could call 'schools', and surely in the years to come more will pop-up due to a growing interest for heritage interpretation around the World. It is foremost on heritage interpreters to recognise the moment, not leaving practice but very hard pushing on the theoretical side.

Conclusion

Museum studies (metaphorically) started cca. 2.300 years ago, with the Alexandrian Museum, an institution[6] established in Alexandria, Egypt. Following this, one could notice isolated ideas which indicate practices of contemporary public museums, in ancient Greece or during the Roman Empire. Post this period, there has been a gap, with the resurrection during Renaissance in the form of exclusive private collection. The important moment was the opening of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (UK), founded in 1683, which is considered the first university museum and (more importantly), the first public museum. However, it took another 250 or more years to witness serious development of scientific discipline fully focused on museum work, or, more precisely, human relation with heritage institutionalised in the form of museums (Schärer, 1999). It was a long trajectory but with result: by the very late 20th/early 21st Century questioning museology/museum studies as recognised scientific discipline is no longer a topic. At the same time (ironically) heritage interpretation does have a longer historical path, since (sort of heritage) interpretation has always been connected with many kinds of human activities. But it failed to see itself important enough to start the same process, pushing towards becoming a unique scientific field, which does implicate, in time, a fully recognised profession too.

Heritage interpretation actors are still, as it seems, more in dilemma which path might benefit them the most: that of being tourist guides, park rangers, entertainers at festivals/cultural events, temporary museum educators, free-lance consultants or partly acting in all

mentioned, depending on context. While it might be fine to some, we do not think it is the best way, as far as we are discussing reaching heritage interpretation as a recognised profession. To reach recognition of heritage interpretation, and thus heritage interpreters as a profession 'small steps' like occasional here and there short training are just not enough – as much as they are welcoming, but it is not enough. Individuals who attend aforesaid could surely benefit from it and get (maybe) better paid contracts for their (future) service[7]. While aforementioned do contribute toward development of heritage interpretation as a profession it is a minor and insufficient step. If heritage interpretation wants to become recognised, so heritage interpreters recognised as a profession, it must be capable of developing a significant 'body of knowledge' which is not relevant only for heritage interpreters but attracting research from (many) other scientific fields to contribute. And further on to enter academia and be present in relevant university programmes, exactly as museology/museum studies done several decades ago.

Endnotes

1. An American writer, enthusiastic about the natural beauty of the United States of America and a close associate with the US (United States) National Park Service.
2. The book "Interpreting Our Heritage", firstly published in late 1950's but the most known by the third edition from 1957 (Tilden, 1977).
3. As e.g. NAI (USA National Association for Interpretation), UK Association for Heritage Interpretation or UNESCO connected ICOMOS - ICIP, where the last is the closest to reach it.
4. The European Association for Heritage Interpretation, formally established in 2010.
5. Translated as: Instruction for a Museum of Natural Objects.
6. Mouseion, the ancient Hellenistic concept of institution dedicated to the Muses devoted to learning and culture, some kind of a hybrid library and proto-museum institution.
7. No statistics or research we are aware of do confirm it indeed happened.

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Reflections on 15 years of Nature Interpretation in Sweden

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the development of nature interpretation in Sweden over the past fifteen years, based on experiences from the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation (SCNI). It explores how SCNI has applied concepts from heritage interpretation to build reflective practice and professional development, and the implications for education and research. Rooted in a Nordic tradition of linking people, nature and culture, nature interpretation has evolved from expert-driven, didactic approaches toward participatory, dialogic and value-based communication fostering meaning making, dialogue and empowerment. SCNI's collaboration with Interpret Europe and the establishment of the Nature Interpretation Lab (NiLab) within Mistra Environmental Communication have strengthened connections between research and practice. The profession now demands interpreters to act as guides, facilitators and co-creators in democratic dialogue. Strengthening education, interdisciplinary cooperation and reflective research environments is essential for advancing interpretation as a professional and academic field contributing to sustainability and heritage communication.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the development of nature interpretation in Sweden over the past fifteen years, built on experiences from the Swedish Centre for Nature Interpretation (SCNI). It examines how SCNI has used different concepts of interpretation as a basis for reflective practice and professional development, and what this means for the future of education and research in heritage interpretation. Nature interpretation in the Nordic countries was defined in 1990 as follows:

> ”The mediation of feelings and knowledge of nature. The goal of nature interpretation is to create an understanding of fundamental ecological and cultural interconnections, as well as human's role in nature. Through nature interpretation, positive experiences are created

that can increase environmental awareness, both for individual and for society as a whole." Nordic Council of Ministers,1990 (in Sandberg et al, 2019)

There is a long tradition of nature interpretation in Sweden spanning from nature excursions with Carl von Linnaeus in the 1800-century enlightenment to the birth of national romantic nature and heritage conservation movement in the beginning of last century striving to strengthen "knowledge and love" for nature, to outdoor education, outdoor life and more recently learning for sustainable development. In 2007 the SEPA decided to create a centre in the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences to support the agency´s communicative work in protected areas and Swedish *Naturum* (visitor centers) and strengthen national interpretation in general. According to a first attempt to overview nature interpretation in Sweden 2009, SCNI concluded that there were many very appreciated guided tours, nature trails, panels and visitor centres in Sweden. Generally, the review concluded that:

1) interpretation staff were generally skilful biologists and ecologists with a deep knowledge and engagement for nature protection and an interest to communicate, but seldom with educational background in communication or pedagogics.
2) they had very limited time for planning, evaluation or adopting a process-oriented approach to developing interpretation.
3) the need for communication was considered urgent, while budgets remained small.

With this background, the next section turns to some of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks from the interpretation field that have been important in SCNI's work to provide tools for reflective professionals, before moving on to discuss how these have been applied in practice.

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks

The contact with the international theoretical and practical field of interpretation has been key to the SCNI support and frameworks offered for interpreters. The centre has a strong collaboration with the European association for heritage interpretation, shortly referred to as Interpret Europe (IE). IE as well as other national and international associations for heritage interpretation define heritage broadly as something inherited from the past or valued enough to keep for the future that is immaterial or material and is defined and redefined over time. Heritage includes both natural and cultural aspects. Communication competences needed to make some kind of differences with interpretation are similar over the nature culture professional divide. Interpreters benefit from meeting and learning across subjects

where expert knowledge and science is the base for the common will to communicate. Storytelling, costumed events or audio guides can be the tools. As can guided tours, interpretive panels or facilitated dialogues. Understanding the relevance for participants is key. Learning landscapes with cultural and natural heritage layers are important arenas for deeper understanding and conversations on the values and decision that has shaped and shaped our landscapes over time – an asset for learning for sustainability, the UN Sustainability Development Goals (SDGs) as well as the Kunming Montreal Global Biodiversity Plan (GBP).

Meaning making and the facilitation of relations between people and nature (a place, phenomena, idea) is a key goal for interpretation. A communication process designed for meaning making in non-formal learning contexts. Many interpreters claim that it is more successful to engage and to influence attitudes and behaviours compared to information, formal education tools or more shallow approaches as entertaining infotainment as guiding principles for free choice learning.

One of the strongest shifts in the practice of nature interpretation is the changing roles and power relations for professional interpreters. Moving from expert driven didactic ambitions to the idea of interpreters as facilitators of meaning making through the activities and programs on offer. Supported for instance by the European Landscape and FARO conventions (Council of Europe, 2000 and 2006 respectively) where the heritage community as cocreators of interpretation, participatory approaches and contributions to democratic dialogue become tasks for professional interpreters. Besides the need to master all the traditional guide skills (such as using first hand experiences and striving for interaction) when they meet participants or visitors to a site.

Interpretation: A Developing Field

The field of interpretation is in constant development, and several schools of thought have impacted the field since Freeman Tilden wrote his thesis on interpretation for the National Park Service in the 1950s (Tilden, 1957). Definitions and approaches to interpretation have evolved with time, all contributing with frames, models and theory of value to consider for reflective practice.

The concepts of natural and cultural heritage interpretation indicate in what professional subject fields interpretation is offered. In the Nordic countries nature interpretation (in Swedish the broader concept of “naturvägledning”) apart from being connected to the field of nature conservation has become an umbrella covering also activities more lightly connected to traditional interpretation theory. The practice of nature interpretation includes outdoor

education and learning for sustainable development. People working with outdoor life activities like hiking, climbing and canoeing or and health promoting activities such as nature connectedness, forest bath and mindfulness are more or less close to nature interpretation. The SCNI encourages outdoor life leaders not to forget to interpret the sites and environments that are the arena for their activities.

Thematic interpretation is one of the most popular and important approaches for teaching and planning interpretation. The model as presented by Sam Ham in Interpretation – making a difference on purpose (Ham, 2013) with the TORE-model (thematic, organized, relevant and enjoyable) is a popular framework to plan and assess interpretation used in SCNI courses. It contributes with practical instructions, food for thought and theory of what makes interpretation capable of “making the difference” many interpreters aim for. The development of relevant and thought-provoking themes are key. The SCNI had the privilege to cooperate with the author professor Sam Ham for some years and translated the book to make it more accessible for Swedish interpreters. It provides tools for both planning of, conducting and evaluating interpretation.

Power relations between initiator and participants in interpretation - and the role of interpretation - was discussed already in the 1980s by David Uzzel presenting the concept of *hot interpretation* (Uzzel, 1998) that can be understood as a normative kind of interpretation where a mission is very clear and outspoken. The traditional neutral scientific and somewhat “journalistic” role of the interpreter to be relevant to broad audiences was abandoned to address sensitive issues with a visible agenda.

The last 15 years concepts that include multiple perspectives, knowledge, voices, opinions when it comes to describing the values and the decisions for the future of a site (a national park, a forest or a water mill) have been of interest as a reaction to the traditional expert driven approach. This shift in perspective in Europe (and the US) occurred in the 2010s when *dialogic interpretation* was described as “challenging” a more mission based thematic approach. Guidelines for interpretation were rewritten. The shift also made a point that stakeholders and participants should be involved or in power of what was addressed and how interpretation was conducted - contributing to telling the story of the site or the phenomenon in question through participation in both planning and programs. The present post-truth discourse might make focus on expert scientific based interpretation more relevant again.

Next step for interpreters with the increasing demand to move from the traditional role as expert guide to cocreator of interpretation is the ability to facilitate dialogic processes, one far reaching ambition is *agonistic interpretation* (Deufel, 2017) helping participants to

understand other perspectives not striving to convince and without going into a debate to win or lose. If successful a sophisticated contribution to democratic dialogue – but quite a challenge for interpreters to master. From 2015 Swedish Naturums (visitor centres) was instructed to invite visitors to an arena for dialogue on sensitive issues as part of their mission.

The reflective element in both thematic and dialogic interpretation needs time. Graham Black suggests planning for s*low interpretation* (Black, 2023) as an important trend in our time. That might imply arranging possibilities to stay for a long time in a site and places to calmly sit down and reflect over the experiences. A reaction to the stressful pace of our time where museums and sites can offer some calm space for reflection.

Finally, *value-based interpretation* is a concept adopted and promoted by both UNESCO and Interpret Europe (Ludwig 2023) the last years (inspired by the ideology of the Faro convention). Visitors are invited to talk about values and how our values shapes action. As when to meet challenges – in for instance the shape of climate change and biodiversity loss, intolerance, violence and fear in society. Facilitated experiences of heritage and conversations on how to shape the heritage of tomorrow and engage citizens in learning landscapes is one of the most important tasks for interpretation in our time (Interpret Europe 2017). Still very much in tune with the intentions of the original definition of Nordic interpretation from the 1990s – but based on a developed understanding of communication.

Reflective practice and research development

Since a few years, the SCNI has been working through Nature Interpretation Lab (NiLab), following a critical living lab approach, that encourages researchers and nature interpreters to explore emerging questions together through collaborating on practical cases that address common challenges.

NiLab started as part of the SCNI's collaboration with the Swedish research program Mistra Environmental Communication. With the experiences of helping and supporting the development of knowledge and methods for nature interpretation in Sweden, CNV has a goal of further developing "reflective practices" in the nature interpretation field. To do that we need both researchers and interpreters. NiLab is the perfect platform for that - and for understanding the future needs for development of education within the field.

Conclusions

The development of the field has moved interpretation from educational aims, focus on behaviour and attitude change to concentrate more on forging of personal meaning and relations to places through first hand experiences, participation, dialogue, empowerment and

ownership. The possible roles of the interpreter and the skills interpreters need to master are increasingly complex and demanding. A range of education offers would be needed to strengthen the profession, from online and other vocational courses to regular courses and master programs that meet this challenge and support professional development.

Apart from Nilab activities SCNI are offering short academic courses for professionals and program students on a small scale - connected to the subjects of Environmental communication and Rural development. Academic subjects connected to cultural and natural heritage do not always see the need or know how to prepare students also for the possible role as interpretation professionals.

Is interpretation something that would be a task for pedagogy or communication studies, for tourism or democracy studies? In turn, how could scholars from subjects like ecology, archaeology or architecture contribute to courses on how to communicate their subjects to the public? The academic and professional divides are strong. Heritage interpretation can be a vehicle to cooperate over the nature-culture divide within academia. To co-create courses and follow the example of professional organisations like Interpret Europe where heritage interpretation covers both natural and cultural heritage connected by the same interest: how to facilitates heritage experiences that inspires meaningful relations with natural and cultural heritage and shapes our common future.

To foster reflective nature interpreters who develop their professional roles. Cooperation and co-development of education with practice and organisations like Interpret Europe that offer vocational training and courses outside the academy is important to create opportunities for professional development on different levels.

Studies of education offers connected to nature guiding in Sweden made visible that academic courses that was not connected to a research environment often disappeared over time. Solid research environments exploring heritage interpretation as a subject in its own right is an important precondition for sustainable university courses as the European master programs the TEHIC project is proposing.

Initiatives as TEHIC and the SCNI Nilab where research and practice meet can move the profession forward in that direction. Cooperation across universities and academic fields can build the ground firmer for the future of heritage interpretation in Europe.

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If It Ain’t Broken, Break It: Being Creative with Interpretation

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Abstract

Museums and heritage sites are often visited for social and emotional experiences rather than factual learning. This paper examines how heritage interpretation can strengthen these encounters, with a focus on the small-scale and volunteer-driven heritage sector in Sweden. Our aim is to make interpretation accessible, engaging, and practice based. Drawing on Freeman Tilden’s principles, Interpret Europe’s training programmes, and our own professional experience, we have developed a participatory model combining digital introductions with hands-on workshops. Participants work directly with their own sites, guided by a “learning by doing” approach. Results show that participants gain confidence, creativity, and renewed enthusiasm. Starting from emotions rather than facts opens new perspectives, while collaboration between professionals and volunteers fosters networks and capacity building. We conclude that lowering barriers and promoting co-creative, practice-oriented learning makes heritage interpretation a powerful tool for deepening visitor engagement and ensuring the sector’s long-term vitality.

Introduction

Why do people visit museums and heritage sites? For many visitors, the primary motivation is not the pursuit of factual knowledge but rather the opportunity to spend meaningful time with family and friends. Learning something new or unexpected may be a welcome addition, but it is rarely the central purpose. Instead, visits to museums often serve to stimulate both the mind and the heart. Traditional displays—such as glass cases filled with objects—can be sufficient for some audiences, offering both cognitive and affective stimulation. However, for many others such presentations are not enough to sustain attention or provoke deeper reflection. As a result, the museum experience may remain pleasant yet fleeting, leaving little that endures beyond the visit itself. Our ambition is different. We want visitors to leave a museum not only intellectually and emotionally engaged but also with a sense of connection to history. In the best of cases, we want them to also change their behaviour for a more

sustainable society. Such a connection fosters a better understanding of the contemporary world and of one's own place within it.

At the core of this lies heritage interpretation. Heritage interpretation enables people to connect directly with phenomena and objects, encouraging reflection, understanding, and the discovery of deeper meanings. As such, it is a powerful means of engaging people with heritage. There is broad consensus within the field that interpretation is both effective and necessary. What remains is to ensure that more practitioners adopt and develop this method, thereby extending its impact. The purpose of this paper is to highlight the need to make heritage interpretation more accessible to professionals and volunteers in the field. It is our strong belief that we need less talk, more action. Heritage interpretation should be fun, co-creative and easy to get started with.

Theoretical Framework

Our work is based primarily on accumulated experience. We are trained in different disciplines—including heritage studies, sociology, and communication—and our professional backgrounds therefore draw on a variety of theoretical foundations. In our roles, we focus on supporting and developing the small-scale and volunteer-driven heritage sector in our region. We have undertaken training and certification in heritage interpretation through Interpret Europe's programmes, including Certified Interpretive Guide, Certified Interpretive Planner, and Certified Interpretive Writer (Interpret Europe, no date). Our theoretical framework is closely aligned with the principles outlined by Freeman Tilden in Interpreting Our Heritage (Tilden, 1957). We are also inspired by the Art of Hosting movement and make use of its participatory methods to create meaningful conversations (Art of Hosting, no date).

In Sweden, there is a long and strong tradition of popular education (folkbildning), a non-formal adult education movement that emphasises collective learning, accessibility, and civic engagement outside the formal school system. This is a large movement in Sweden, engaging a large group of people of all ages and backgrounds (Folkbildningsrådet, 2025). Closely connected to this are voluntary associations, such as local heritage societies (hembygdsföreningar), which bring people together to preserve and develop local heritage while also providing spaces for cultural and social life (Sveriges Hembygdsförbund, n.d.). These organisations bring people together to learn collectively and to engage in the preservation and development of their local heritage. In doing so, they contribute to community cohesion, trust, and confidence in democratic principles. Associations and volunteer-run museums also play a vital role in providing cultural activities, social events, and experiences in local communities. Within this sphere, academic titles and formal certifications are neither required nor sought after. Instead, what matters is the ability to

recognise and harness people's passion and commitment to the places where they live and act. To strengthen associations and enhance the experiences of their visitors, our work must therefore remain practice-oriented and grounded in a bottom-up perspective.

Methodology

Our methodological approach is rooted in both existing models of heritage interpretation and our own long-term professional experience. While the courses developed by Interpret Europe have been an important source of inspiration, we have found that their approach does not fully resonate with the contexts and audiences we work with. As a result, we have adapted and reshaped the format, drawing on a combination of theoretical perspectives, practical experiences, and alternative methods. This has enabled us to create a practice-oriented model of training that is more accessible, engaging, and sustainable for our target groups.

The training we have developed is delivered in a blended format, combining digital sessions with a concluding in-person meeting. The digital course provides an introduction and a starting point, while the final face-to-face meeting offers opportunities for deeper engagement, co-creation, and embodied practice. Participants are expected to be fully committed and to follow the entire course in order to benefit fully from the training. At the same time, we emphasise that the outcome is largely shaped by what each participant invests in the process. No prior knowledge of heritage interpretation is required, and the courses attract participants with varying levels of experience and from a wide range of organisations. This diversity enriches the learning environment: professionals and volunteers learn alongside one another, discovering common challenges as well as complementary strengths. The encounter between these groups is often described by participants as one of the most valuable aspects of the training.

A defining feature of our methodology is its participatory character. We place strong emphasis on co-creation, where participants are actively involved in shaping the learning process. Sessions are structured around practical exercises, collaborative problem-solving, and opportunities to experiment with interpretive methods. Rather than focusing on theoretical frameworks or the acquisition of specialist vocabulary, we encourage participants to reflect, try out, and adapt methods directly to their own contexts.

Finally, our approach acknowledges the vital role of civil society in heritage work. Volunteers and community-based organisations are central to the preservation and communication of heritage, often serving as the primary point of contact with the public. By tailoring our training to their circumstances and recognising their unique contributions, we aim to strengthen their

capacity to engage audiences, thereby supporting broader processes of social and cultural development.

Results / Main Discussion

The Prisma Initiative – building capacity together

The Prisma initiative in Västra Götaland Region provides an example of capacity building through collaboration between public and non-profit organisations (Prisma Västra Götaland, no date). The organisations that make up Prisma work under different conditions but face similar challenges. By getting to know and understanding one another, we can help each other improve – together. This is a long-term collaboration built on a solid foundation, which means we can work towards sustainable change over time and achieve a lot with relatively modest resources. In Prisma, we organise joint conferences, working groups and skills development in areas such as organisational development, marketing and visitor destination development. For the past few years, we have also made a significant investment in heritage interpretation.

Over the past five years, we have designed and delivered short, practical courses in heritage interpretation tailored to the needs of professionals and volunteers alike. These courses avoid heavy theoretical frameworks or extensive and complicated vocabularies. Instead, they focus on hands-on exercises, storytelling, emotional connection, and playful exploration. By prioritising practice over theory, we have reached a wide range of participants across the sector, many of whom would not otherwise have engaged with interpretation training.

Skills Before Certificates

Formal qualifications in heritage interpretation—degrees, certifications, or extensive theoretical training— are undoubtedly important. However, the sector depends heavily on individuals who cannot realistically pursue such paths: overworked professionals in small institutions and dedicated volunteers who sustain local heritage sites. For these groups, academic routes are often inaccessible in terms of time, cost, or interest. Our approach therefore emphasises accessible, practice-based learning rather than academic credentials. Not every heritage worker needs to become a specialist in interpretation; rather, they need methods that empower them to share their passion, stories, and sense of place effectively with visitors.

Learning by Doing

Central to our methodology is the principle of learning by doing. Our courses, workshops and inspiration days are structured around practical activities, collaborative exercises, and experimentation. We employ colourful and playful materials, encourage participants to take creative risks, and model an approach that is both professional and approachable. This ethos reduces barriers, creating an atmosphere where participants feel comfortable trying new methods. As a result, many report a renewed sense of creativity and greater enthusiasm for meeting their audiences. While not every participant undertakes major change, most implement some adjustments to their practice—and these small steps collectively represent significant progress.

A central aspect of our learning by doing approach is that participants work with their own site from the very first session, developing material that becomes directly applicable in their professional or voluntary practice after the course. By immediately engaging with their own context and starting to shape new guided tours or interpretive panels, participants are able to work in depth and—through our support—carry out a well-structured process that can be readily implemented.

The approach is rewarding not only for each individual but also for the group as a whole: participants learn from one another by following each other's processes and witnessing new visitor experiences take shape. In addition, this way of working strengthens relationships between participants, a benefit that many describe as one of the most valuable outcomes of the training, continuing to provide support and inspiration long after the course has ended.

Walking in Other Shoes – the Value of Experimentation

Heritage professionals and volunteers often find themselves constrained by routine and established practices. Our training encourages participants to "walk in other shoes" by experimenting with new methods of engagement. This process is not only about learning new techniques but also about cultivating curiosity and a willingness to take risks. Many participants have reflected that the opportunity to test alternative approaches rekindles their enthusiasm for their work, reminding them that interpretation is as much about imagination and creativity as it is about knowledge.

If It Ain't Broken, Break It!

When we apply new methods, unexpected things may happen. As one of our participants remarked with a mix of humour and surprise: "I realise now that I've been doing everything completely wrong!" Before, his guided tours were based mainly on communicating facts, which meant that the more he learned, the longer his tours became. Only the truly interested

stayed for the whole tour and had a deep and meaningful experience, but for the others it was simply too much. In our course, he was encouraged to throw the facts aside for a moment and instead focus on the feelings his place evoked. This shift helped him see that guiding in a museum could be done differently—more rewarding for himself, and more meaningful for visitors.

By setting aside the familiar story and looking at a site with fresh eyes, participants often discover new perspectives and possibilities for interpretation. Beginning with emotions can open doors that facts alone may not. This way of working can provide a real boost, even breathing new life into an organisation. Previous practices are not dismissed, but by experimenting with new methods participants find ways to deepen visitors' understanding and create experiences that feel more alive.

Do Not Go Alone

One of our key observations is that change is far more likely to occur when individuals do not attend courses alone. When only a single person from an organisation participates, the impact tends to be limited. By contrast, when colleagues attend together, the probability of implementing new methods and sustaining them increases significantly. Shared experiences foster mutual encouragement, accountability, and a stronger sense of purpose. This mirrors our own approach as facilitators: we deliver courses and workshops as a team of three, using our different perspectives and strengths to model collaboration in practice. This finding highlights the importance of collaboration not only within courses but also within organisations, reinforcing the idea that sustainable change is a collective rather than an individual process.

The Challenge of Change

Despite these successes, challenges remain. Change is inherently difficult, particularly in a sector where resources are limited and staff and volunteers are often overwhelmed by daily demands. Trying something new can feel risky: participants may worry about audience reactions, about relinquishing expert authority, or about not having sufficient factual knowledge to guide an interpretive encounter. Moreover, prioritising time for professional development can be difficult in already stretched organisations.

However, our experience shows that once participants overcome these barriers—even in modest ways—the rewards are considerable. Heritage interpretation proves to be an adaptable method that resonates widely, provided practitioners approach it with curiosity, openness, and a genuine love of their sites and stories. The process can sometimes feel challenging at first, but many participants describe a moment when things suddenly fall into

place. What once felt unfamiliar becomes a source of inspiration, opening new perspectives on their work. For several, it is a relief to realise that they are allowed to move beyond fact-heavy routines and adopt a more engaging approach. Although stepping outside established traditions can be difficult, it often becomes an eye-opener—one that gives participants renewed confidence and energy to connect people with heritage in meaningful ways. This underscores the need to continue lowering barriers and creating opportunities for accessible, practice-based learning in the heritage sector.

Conclusions and Reflections

This paper has explored how heritage interpretation can be used to engage both professionals and volunteers, fostering meaningful connections between audiences and heritage sites. Drawing on our own experience in the Västra Götaland Region and informed by established frameworks such as Tilden's principles and Interpret Europe, we have developed a practice-oriented, participatory model that combines digital learning with in-person workshops.

Our findings indicate that accessible, hands-on training encourages creativity, collaboration, and experimentation. Participants report increased confidence, renewed enthusiasm, and a deeper understanding of how to engage visitors effectively. The encounter between professionals and volunteers, often with varying levels of experience, emerges as a particularly valuable aspect of the courses, strengthening networks and mutual understanding across the sector.

At the same time, challenges remain. Change requires commitment, time, and a willingness to embrace new approaches, which can be difficult in a resource-constrained environment. Nonetheless, our experience demonstrates that even modest adjustments in practice can have meaningful impact, and that heritage interpretation is a versatile tool capable of reaching a wide audience when barriers are lowered and learning is made participatory and enjoyable.

In conclusion, we argue that expanding the adoption of practice-based, inclusive, and collaborative approaches to heritage interpretation is essential for the ongoing vitality of the sector. By building capacity, fostering experimentation, and bridging gaps between professional and volunteer actors, interpretation can not only enrich visitor experiences but also strengthen the broader social and cultural value of heritage.

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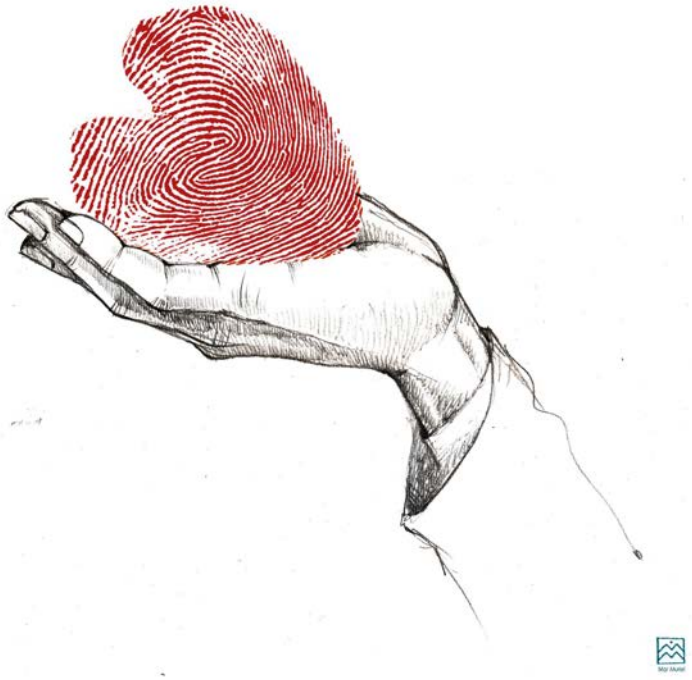

Reimagining Urban Heritage: The Role of Community in Heritage Interpretation and Revitalization in Historic Urban Precincts

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Abstract

Urban heritage conservation is increasingly recognizing the importance of integrating community-driven approaches to not only preserve physical landmarks but also interpret and convey the cultural significance of historical precincts. The study emphasizes how participatory methodologies can challenge traditional top-down urban planning paradigms by integrating both community-driven engagement and heritage interpretation through weaving local narratives, cultural memory, and interpretive practices into the fabric of urban regeneration. The research focuses on how community involvement in the project was not only integral to the conservation process but also to the interpretation of the heritage site's meaning and significance. Key findings highlight that the integration of heritage interpretation within the revitalization process allowed the community to act as co-creators of the cultural narrative, contributing professional skills in heritage documentation and interpretation of intangible cultural heritage. The study illustrates how community engagement in heritage interpretation can offer a sustainable and context-sensitive framework for urban revitalization.

Introduction

Heritage conservation in historic urban settings often privileges expert knowledge and material fabric over lived experiences and cultural meanings (Smith, 2006; Abdurahiman, Kasthurba and Nuzhat, 2024b). This conventional, top-down approach to urban conservation frequently side-lines communities, reducing their role to passive beneficiaries rather than active participants. In response to this challenge, the revitalization of the Kuttichira Tank Precinct in Calicut, Kerala, India, offered an alternative paradigm: community-driven heritage interpretation. This paper examines the case of Kuttichira as a model that prioritises cultural narratives and local memory in heritage-making. Drawing on the Historic Urban Landscape

(HUL) approach and its emphasis on integrated and people-centred conservation, the project engaged community members not only in the design and planning process but in shaping the very meaning and value of the site through interpretive strategies (UNESCO, 2011). It highlights the emerging role of communities as heritage storytellers, demonstrating the potential for participatory interpretation to transform urban conservation into a more inclusive, evolving, and contextually grounded practice.

The aim of our study is to examine how community-driven heritage interpretation can be meaningfully integrated into urban conservation projects. This isn't simply about consultation; it's about fundamental transformation of who controls the narrative of heritage significance. The research is guided by five critical questions: First, how can community-driven approaches challenge traditional top-down urban planning paradigms? Second, what role does heritage interpretation play in empowering communities to become co-creators, not passive recipients, of cultural narratives? Third, how does participatory engagement foster genuine community ownership? Fourth, what mechanisms allow local narratives to be integrated into regeneration processes? And finally, how can successful models be replicated in other contexts? These questions emphasise on collaborative approaches that empower communities to tell and preserve their own stories.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The work builds on the theoretical premise that heritage is not a fixed entity but a socially constructed and dynamically interpreted cultural process (Smith, 2006; Waterton and Smith, 2010; Watson and Waterton, 2010; Abdurahiman, Kasthurba and Nuzhat, 2024a; Abdurahiman, 2025). It aligns with the HUL Recommendation, which calls for the recognition of both tangible and intangible attributes of heritage in urban contexts (UNESCO, 2011). This study also draws upon recent shifts in heritage interpretation that reframe it as a dialogical, community-led act rather than an expert monologue (Staiff, 2016). Community interpretation, in this sense, is not an auxiliary tool but the mechanism through which heritage becomes relevant, inclusive, and impactful. Interpretation here becomes the interface where heritage, community, and urban governance intersect (Graham, Ashworth and Tunbrigde, 2000; Silverman, 2014).

Methodology

The paper uses a case study approach to examine the Kuttichira Tank Precinct Revitalization Project. A mixed-method strategy was adopted. Archival and historical research on the Kuttichira precinct's socio-cultural and architectural significance was done. Participatory design workshops with community members, including heritage walks and

mapping exercises were conducted. Stakeholder interviews were held with representatives from the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), Nirmiti Kendra, and the Department of Architecture at NIT Calicut. Site documentation was performed with a thorough before-and-after site analysis, including visual documentation and spatial assessment. The methodological framing was influenced by action research principles that prioritize reflexivity, community agency, and iterative feedback.

The Heritage of Kuttichira: Tangible and Intangible Layers

Kuttichira, located in the historic Thekkepuram area of Calicut, is a layered cultural landscape shaped by Islamic and vernacular Kerala traditions. The central tank (*chira*) historically served both as a community water source and as a cultural anchor. Architectural elements such as timber houses and historic mosques coexist with public pathways and gathering spaces. However, prior to the project, the area suffered from neglect, infrastructural decay, and symbolic detachment from local identity. The revitalization of the Kuttichira pond in Calicut was a collaborative effort between the Department of Architecture & Planning at National Institute of Technology Calicut, the District Tourism Promotion Council (DTPC), and Nirmiti Kendra. The goal of the project was to approach the project from the bottom-top approach integrating engaging the community in the overall process. The pond, which covers two acres, underwent a renovation costing ₹2 crore, with funding contributions from DTPC and MLA fund. The theme of the renovation was in line with the cultural heritage and history of the Calicut port city. The Kuttichira Tank Precinct Revitalization Project involved upgrading the existing drainage, paving pathways and steps to the pond, adding lighting, signage, and waste disposal facilities to improve the overall quality of the urban public space for community use. A park near the cultural center building was upgraded into a children's play area with attractive landscapes and play fixtures. The revitalization project of Kuttichira pond and its surrounding area has allowed visitors to rediscover the rich history and heritage of the port city of Kozhikode. By preserving the natural heritage and creating a living museum, the project has significantly enhanced the cultural richness of the region and its impact on tourism.

Community as Heritage Interpreters: Interpreting Through Design

Each physical intervention was grounded in community heritage interpretation. The open pavilions on the north and east sides provide seating with views of the water body, but their design emerged from community discussions about how they traditionally used these spaces. The traditional Kerala-style bathhouse (*kulappura)* features simple sloping roofs and exposed laterite walls. This wasn't just architectural pastiche; rather community members identified this as essential to maintaining their cultural practices while ensuring children's

safety. The children's play area near the cultural center wasn't just landscape enhancement, it represented community priorities about intergenerational heritage transmission. One of the key innovations was the Ibn Batuta walkway -what we call a "living museum". This wasn't imposed by experts; it emerged from community interpretation workshops where residents connected their local history to broader historical narratives. The walkway features paved paths, signage, and relief works that promote awareness of Kuttichira's history, but through community-generated interpretive content. The transformation wasn't just physical, it was interpretive. Every design decision emerged from community-driven heritage interpretation workshops. Residents didn't just participate; they became heritage interpreters, identifying what aspects of their cultural landscape needed preservation and enhancement. Instead of limiting the community to consultative roles, the project treated them as primary heritage interpreters. Residents were invited to share oral histories, name forgotten spaces, and propose cultural uses of built forms. Children participated through drawing exercises, while elders recounted stories connecting the pond to festivals and everyday life. These narratives directly informed the revitalization design, ensuring cultural resonance (Abdurahiman, Kasthurba and Nuzhat, 2024b).

Discussion

A three-level interpretive framework emerged from the project, revealing a dynamic ecosystem of cultural translation and advocacy that bridges individual memory with institutional power. At the Heritage-Community interface, interpretive workshops function as crucial spaces of collective meaning-making, where fragmented personal memories are woven together into coherent design narratives that can guide community action and identity formation. The Community-City interface operates as a platform for civic engagement, where these locally generated interpretive outputs become powerful tools for communities to articulate their values, needs, and visions to municipal authorities who might otherwise lack understanding of grassroots perspectives. Finally, the Heritage-City interface creates a direct channel for community voices to reach decision-makers, as resident-developed heritage assessments provide concrete evidence of cultural and socio-economic value that speaks to the language of policy and planning. Together, these interfaces create a multi-layered communication system that transforms intimate cultural knowledge into actionable civic discourse, enabling communities to advocate for their heritage while demonstrating its broader significance to urban development processes. This framework ensured continuous feedback loops, embedding interpretation as a planning tool rather than post-hoc storytelling.

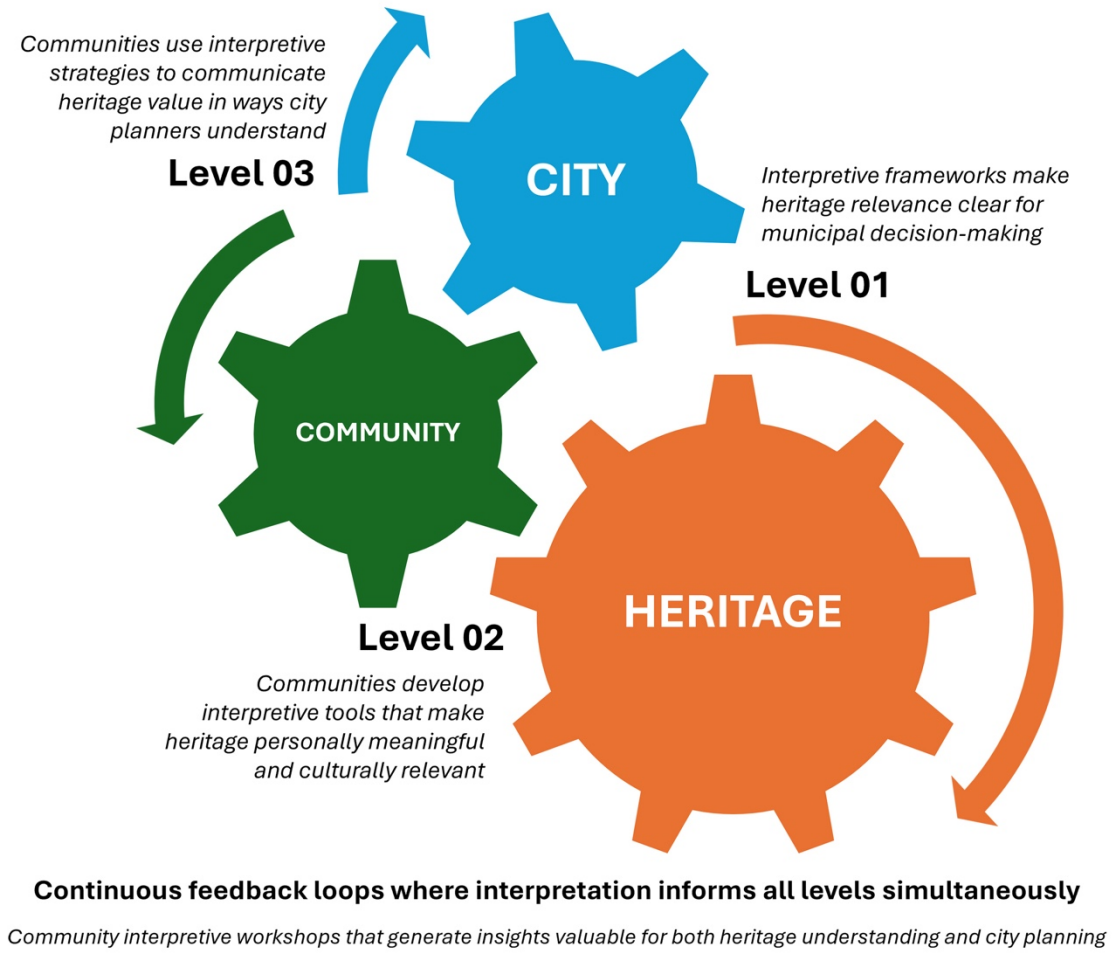

Figure 1. Community-driven theoretical framework. (Source: Author's own, 2025).

The contextual methodology recognizes that the Historic Urban Landscape approach needs contextualized local endeavours. Heritage Interpretation serves as the critical bridge facilitating meaningful connections between communities and their cultural heritage. This isn't just about recognizing heritage values, it's about communities actively interpreting, communicating, and making heritage accessible to diverse stakeholders through participatory interpretive tools and methods. Community engagement in the model means residents become heritage interpreters, not just consultees. Heritage interpretation becomes the method through which the tank's significance is collaboratively understood and communicated. Urban resource recognition happens through community-developed interpretive tools that make heritage accessible to diverse audiences. This represents a fundamental paradigm shift, transforming urban conservation from a preservation exercise into a living, interpretive practice where heritage continues to evolve through community meaning-making while maintaining its cultural significance. Instead of experts interpreting heritage for communities, communities become the interpreters themselves, developing

tools and methods that make their heritage accessible, engaging, and relevant to diverse stakeholders.

Education and Professionalisation Implications

The project revealed the absence of interpretation as a formal component in Indian urban conservation education. Most architectural and planning curricula overlook the social science dimensions of interpretation. There is an urgent need to professionalise interpretive practice, not just through technical training but through interdisciplinary education involving anthropology, design, and cultural studies. The Kuttichira case demonstrates that interpretive skills such as facilitation, narrative design, visual communication, are critical to the sustainability and inclusiveness of heritage projects. Future urban conservation professionals must be trained not only to preserve materials but to mediate meaning.

Conclusion

The revitalization of the Kuttichira Tank Precinct offers a compelling example of how participatory heritage interpretation can deepen the cultural relevance and sustainability of urban conservation efforts. It redefines the role of communities from heritage recipients to active storytellers and stewards. Through the study, four key drivers were identified that led to the success of the urban revitalization: (a) Community engagement for heritage interpretation; (b) Heritage Interpretation; (c) Urban Resource Recognition through community-led developed interpretive tools; and (d) Effective Planning resulted from this interpretive foundation, ensuring sustainability and relevance. Heritage interpretation, in this context, is the vital mechanism that animates the HUL approach and transforms physical revitalization into a meaningful cultural process. Heritage Interpretation is not an add-on to the HUL approach, it's the mechanism that makes HUL truly participatory. Instead of experts interpreting heritage for communities, communities become the interpreters themselves, developing tools and methods that make their heritage accessible, engaging, and relevant to diverse stakeholders.

The Kuttichira Tank project demonstrates that when communities become heritage interpreters, conservation becomes sustainable, relevant, and truly participatory. This model can be replicated in other contexts, but only when we fundamentally shift our understanding of who has the authority to interpret heritage significance. The future of heritage interpretation lies not in better expert interpretation, but in empowering communities to become the primary interpreters of their own cultural narratives. The paper advocates for greater integration of interpretive methods in both policy and education. It calls for the development of interdisciplinary curricula, tools, and platforms that equip professionals and

communities alike to engage in shared storytelling and heritage-making. As urban landscapes continue to evolve, such inclusive practices will be essential in sustaining not only historic fabric but living memory.

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The Identity of the Urban and Metropolitan Peripheries: Recent Heritagisation Processes Including Local Communities

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Abstract

This study reflects on the possibilities and limitations of participatory methodologies involving local actors who play a key role in heritage recognition and appropriation processes (political representatives, public administration, residents, cultural associations, economic agents, etc.). It is framed within the JPI-CUMET project (Cultural Heritage in Metropolitan Peripheries), which explores heritagisation processes from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives in metropolitan and peripheral urban contexts. In Madrid, the selected case studies are the districts of Usera and Villaverde, located in the southern part of the city, both marked by strong multiculturalism, a legacy of working-class neighbourhood movements, and industrial memory. Participatory action-research activities were conducted to develop a methodology that systematizes local heritage knowledge from a bottom-up approach. Here, heritage interpretation is used as a tool to understand how local groups perceive and represent their neighbourhoods' heritage, actively contributing to the construction of the heritagisation process.

Introduction

The peripheral and metropolitan areas of cities are, to varying degrees, subject to ongoing processes of growth and transformation. Since the second half of the 19th century—and with particular intensity throughout the 20th and 21st centuries—these areas have undergone exponential development, giving rise to distinct and recognizable identities often linked to their urban periphery status: working-class, industrial, productive, among others. However, the recognition and valorisation of the material traces of their recent urban history—such as social housing, factories, warehouses, or port infrastructures—are often diminished, especially when urban transformations are rapid and disruptive. In this context, the appreciation and preservation of unique and identity-defining elements requires the

deployment of methodological approaches that allow us to understand (but also support) the processes of heritage preservation from different perspectives (top-down, bottom-up), as well as the interpretative keys adopted by the different stakeholders involved in these processes.

Within this context, the JPI-CUMET project (Cultural Heritage in Metropolitan Peripheries) employs a range of participatory methodologies that actively engage local stakeholders at multiple levels in the processes of heritage recognition and appropriation in peripheral areas of Paris, Edinburgh, and Madrid. This article focuses exclusively on the selected case studies in Madrid, specifically the districts of Usera and Villaverde, located in the southern part of the city. Both areas are characterized by a strong multicultural identity, a history of grassroots neighbourhood movements, and an industrial heritage. The research is grounded in various participatory activities, following an action-research approach, developed in collaboration with local stakeholders in the aforementioned districts. The primary aim is to conduct an in-depth analysis of the scope and implications of recent heritagisation processes, based on the interpretation of heritage values that local groups attribute to distinctive elements within their urban environments.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The interpretation of cultural heritage is a complex process in which multiple perspectives on the object of study converge. Broadly defined, heritage interpretation can be understood as the transformation of the discourse surrounding heritage into an empathetic language capable of reaching diverse social groups (Tilden, 1957/1977). By constructing a discourse with varying levels of complexity—or layers of interpretation—different methodological approaches also come into play. In heritage-making processes, the notion of interpretation is reversed: rather than adapting expert discourse to valorise selected heritage elements, the focus shifts to the voices of local communities and other social actors, foregrounding their own narratives of value attribution. In this way, interpretation becomes a critical tool that highlights what different social groups consider to be heritage. Accordingly, the bidirectional nature of both heritagisation and interpretation processes is emphasized—whether through top-down or bottom-up approaches. Interpretation is not only conceived as a form of strategic communication that fosters intellectual and emotional connections between heritage objects and participants—thereby generating new meanings for the interpreted resource (Ham and Morales, 2008)—but also as a means of incorporating the value discourses articulated by heritage users themselves (Smith, 2006). Thus, the emphasis shifts from the heritage object to the subject who identifies and defines its value.

In urban and metropolitan peripheries, the study of interpretation and value attribution processes is particularly relevant, as the recognition of their specificity and significance as cultural heritage is relatively recent, allowing for an almost real-time analysis of such dynamics. Peripheral neighbourhoods encompass a wide range of cultural elements and representations tied to their peripheral condition, including industrial buildings, railway infrastructures, social housing, or working-class memory. These elements are subject to processes of value attribution—whether through heritage recognition or official designation—that follow different logics: top-down, when the process is led by expert actors (academics, institutions, professionals, policymakers); or bottom-up, when it emerges from local stakeholders, residents, or organized civil society (García Hernández and Gravari Barbas, 2024; Revilla et al., 2024). In all cases, the heritage valuation of these elements is closely linked to the ways in which the identity of urban peripheries is perceived, interpreted, and brought to the fore.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative methodology grounded in both the documentary analysis of secondary sources and fieldwork aimed at collecting primary data on discourses related to heritage interpretation and value attribution. From a temporal perspective, the research activities that structure this methodology were carried out in two phases. In the first phase, a series of participatory workshops were designed and implemented with the primary goal of identifying and mapping the unique elements that the local community recognizes as significant and to which it attributes heritage value in terms of identity—that is, elements perceived as embodying the neighbourhood's identity and considered worth preserving, conserving, or communicating. In the second phase, an in-depth study of these elements was conducted through a combination of documentary analysis—drawing on academic literature and institutional reports that reflect expert discourses—and fieldwork activities, including interviews and life histories with residents and members of organized civil society, which provided insight into the community's own perceptions and interpretations.

The selected case studies encompass a variety of elements: some had already been formally recognized as heritage by experts or institutions, while others were identified as having potential for heritage designation. The ultimate goal of the CUMET project is to include these case studies in a shared digital repository titled Observatory of Heritage in Metropolitan Peripheries. In its final stage, this platform will feature dissemination materials co-created with local stakeholders, such as educational kits for secondary school students, podcasts, and other resources. These materials will serve as bases and support for further

heritage professionals in the field of heritage interpretation and heritagisation processes in urban and metropolitan peripheries.

Within the scope of the research, theoretical and conceptual aspects related to heritage interpretation are integrated into the methodological development in two key ways: (1) as an object of analysis in the existing and widely circulated discourses on heritage (via documentary analysis); and (2) as an analytical focus in the community-driven heritage interpretations produced during the participatory workshops.

Results and Main Discussion

The results obtained in this research reveal that, from a bottom-up perspective, significant elements are identified by residents of Usera and Villaverde, which are important in terms of identity because they embody the recent historical meaning of the space they inhabit. These elements are diverse in type: industrial spaces (standing buildings or ruins) in the district of Villaverde; working-class housing neighbourhoods (representative of urban improvement processes promoted through participatory urbanism in the 1980s, such as Orcasitas); green spaces like Pradolongo Park; urban areas known as Chinatown in Usera; and even more intangible aspects such as working-class memory and neighbourhood struggles.

However, unlike expert interpretations derived from documentary analysis—including inventories, archives, newspaper collections, and digital media—the results of participatory workshops and semi-structured interviews with residents and local actors currently demonstrate limited recognition of the heritage value of these elements. While expert discourse primarily emphasizes the architectural values of certain buildings (such as former factories or working-class neighbourhoods), inhabitants tend to recognize their importance from an identity-based perspective. For instance, interviews include statements like “Industry in Villaverde is in our DNA; it's a testament to the neighbourhood's history. We've been an industrial neighbourhood”. Nevertheless, significant challenges arise regarding the valorisation and protection of these elements. Firstly, it appears that only the older population associates neighbourhood pride with the conservation of material testimonies from the recent past, while younger residents and immigrants feel emotionally disconnected from this legacy. Secondly, there are aspects of great pride in identity, such as neighbourhood activism and associationalism, that are difficult to heritage-designate due to their intangible nature. In this regard, with the support of professionals and experts in the field of heritage interpretation, it seems necessary to link these elements with material remains that could be musealised or interpreted, or with new facilities that channel the presentation, interpretation, and preservation of this memory, such as museums or interpretation centers.

In the Usera neighbourhood, the results show a differentiated perspective on heritage recognition when using methodologies adapted to different age groups. For example, parallel activities conducted with a group of children during participatory workshops sought to interpret the discourse generated through a more personal relationship with the neighbourhood, structured around the initial phrase “I like,” combining drawing and writing on large-format worksheets. This approach follows one of the principles of heritage interpretation formulated by Tilden (1957/1977), which states that activities aimed at children should not be mere simplified versions of adult activities but require fundamentally different approaches and specific programs for optimal engagement. Once again, the presence of experts combining the background of children education methodologies and heritage value interpretation becomes a fundamental role, permitting also the production of further education and dissemination materials with the results obtained for its replicability and implementation with other groups (booklets, podcasts, short MOOC videos, etc.). Comparing both cases, the children interpret the neighbourhood from a more everyday perspective, with less emphasis on heritage values, highlighting the need for experts to create a prior context addressing heritage and its interpretation when conducting co-creation activities.

Conclusions and Reflections

Preliminary results from the ongoing CUMET project indicate that multiple factors converge in Usera and Villaverde, transforming urban and heritage discourses, fostering the emergence of citizen and institutional initiatives aimed at heritage protection and dissemination, and promoting tourism activation (as in the case of Chinatown) and urban renewal in certain areas of these neighbourhoods. Similar to other urban peripheries in Madrid, the heritage discourse intertwines with processes of spatial transformation related to usage (increased cultural and recreational offerings), urban regeneration (public space reactivation projects and infrastructure improvements), social change (gentrification and growing tourist appeal), and the reinterpretation of urban space, contributing to improved perceptions of these previously stereotyped and/or stigmatized peripheral neighbourhoods within the collective Madrid imagination.

The work carried out within the framework of the CUMET project confirms that heritage is a socially and culturally situated construction, in which meanings are not inherent to objects but emerge from interpretive processes and social relationships. This perspective facilitates the analysis of the negotiation, contestation, and sharing of heritage values in diverse contexts, especially in peripheral spaces where official narratives are often absent or minimally representative. In such contexts, heritage-making processes not only make local memories and practices visible but also function as tools for social empowerment and

identity revaluation. For that reason, the existence of expert practitioners in the field of heritage values interpretation, putting society in the center of the heritagisation processes as active agents, becomes a clue for a better understanding and valorisation. The active participation of communities in the identification, interpretation, and appropriation of heritage promotes forms of cultural agency that transcend traditional institutional frameworks.

However, it is important to highlight that the heritagisation processes in urban peripheries involve tensions and contradictions. Bottom-up processes can clash with institutional logics of heritage management or be instrumentalised by urban policies aimed at territorial revalorization for economic or touristic purposes, as is the case with the Chinatown project in Usera. Hence, the need of having experienced people in this field will help to have neutral support from professionals who will help in the balance and coo-existence of interests, finding common points between top-down and bottom-up perspectives, such as the dichotomy between the social value versus the architectural value emerged in the industrial building examples of Villaverde. Therefore, a critical analysis of the processes of interpretation and heritagisation is essential, paying special attention to the power dynamics involved and to the emerging community strategies in defense of local heritage. Interpretation, therefore, is neither a neutral nor merely communicative act but a political process that directly influences the construction of collective identities and the definition of narratives about the past and present of territories.

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The Role and Impact of Heritage Practitioners within a Tribal Structure on the Interpretation and Presentation of National Heritage

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Abstract

As the United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to modernise rapidly, the meaning-making of national cultural heritage is increasingly influenced by both state-led initiatives and community-based approaches. However, official heritage recognition processes, such as those linked to UNESCO, often involve selective practices that may overlook elements of living heritage upheld by tribal communities. This research investigates the challenges faced by a diverse, modernising country in balancing national heritage narratives with the community's interpretation of intangible heritage. Focusing on the UAE, this study examines how heritage practitioners with tribal affiliations contribute to safeguarding intangible heritage in ways that may deviate from institutional frameworks of heritage interpretation. The research stresses the critical role of tribal heritage practitioners as custodians of cultural memory and identity. Recognising their contributions is essential to prioritising the experiences and knowledge of living heritage in the meaning-making processes of national cultural heritage.

Introduction

Heritage interpretation, i.e. the practice of communicating the meanings, values, and significance of cultural and natural heritage to diverse audiences, plays a pivotal role in shaping public understanding and engagement with the past (Nowacki, 2021) and has increasingly moved beyond didactic transmission towards more inclusive, dialogic, and participatory approaches (Silverman, 2015). In contexts of rapid modernisation and strong governance involvement, such as the United Arab Emirates (UAE)[1], this research interrogates these dynamics by examining how heritage interpretation is constructed, negotiated, and contested, particularly through the lens of intangible heritage that are affiliated with tribal knowledge systems. Employing a qualitative methodology, this study includes case studies from the UAE, supported by fieldwork, observations and document

analysis of the topics discussed in this study. Findings reveal complex tensions and hierarchies in the context of national heritage interpretation, including those between formal and informal narratives, internal and external expressions of identity, and top-down versus bottom-up approaches.

Theoretical Approach

This section provides definitions for and background relevant to concepts and issues related to heritage interpretation. Understanding the dynamics of heritage interpretation in the UAE requires understanding cultural heritage context in the Arabian Gulf region—a region characterised by distinctive coexistence of tangible and intangible heritage but is also subject to geopolitical challenges, cultural homogenisation, and rapid urbanisation (Yateem, 2016). Such dynamics constantly negotiates traditions and modernity which necessitates a clear conceptual grounding in the intersecting notions of intangible heritage, tribal systems, nation-building, and meaning-making processes.

Intangible Heritage as Living Heritage

Intangible heritage, as defined by UNESCO's 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, refers to practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, and skills transmitted from generation to generation (Kurin, 2004). Unlike tangible heritage, intangible heritage is inherently dynamic and adaptive, often evolving through lived experience. In the Arabian Gulf region, intangible heritage encompasses oral poetry, falconry, maritime knowledge, traditional dance performances and ceremonial practices (Hobbs, 2017). These traditions are not static remnants of the past, but forms of living heritage—a concept that emphasises continuity, community relevance, and transformation over time (Hafstein, 2009).

Tribal Structure as a System

Tribal structures have historically functioned as foundational socio-political systems across the Arabian Peninsula, predating the formation of modern nation-states. Tribes in the Arabian Gulf region (within the borders of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Kuwait) are not simply genealogical entities, but intricate systems of governance, resource sharing, and cultural transmission (AlShryani, 2020). Within these communities are the heritage practitioners who occupy crucial custodianship and intermediary roles (AlSharekh, 2007)—both custodians and interpreters of living heritage, but their agency is often overlooked in state-led heritage narratives. The link between tribal systems and local communities is thus critical to understanding who participates in heritage interpretation and how authenticity is claimed and performed (Reisinger & Steiner, 2006; AlShaikh, 2024).

National Identity as Nationalism

Scholars such as Fox & Miller-Idriss (2008), and Antonsich (2016) remind us that everyday nationhood is also articulated through the needs, values, and cultural preferences of ordinary people. In the context of the Arabian Gulf region, living heritage has been instrumental in crafting cohesive national identities amidst rapid socio-economic transformation and demographic plurality (Yateem, 2016). This often manifests in the selective elevation of tribal histories, practices, and values as emblematic of culture, while marginalising others (AlSuwaidi, 2018). Such practices are not neutral; they reflect a form of heritage nationalism wherein intangible heritage becomes a tool of soft power and legitimacy (Heard-Bey, 2005). Hence, the role of interpretation within this context becomes politically charged, as it shapes how the nation is imagined, remembered, and performed.

Interpretation as Meaning-Making

Heritage interpretation, defined as the communication of heritage significance to audiences (Tilden, 1957), is increasingly viewed as a process of meaning-making that involves negotiation, translation, and contestation (Kidd, 2011; Gilson & Kool, 2019). In the Arabian Gulf region, interpretation is not simply about transmitting factual narratives, but about negotiating cultural meanings across generations, languages, and political contexts. For instance, the revival of *sadu* - a traditional ground-loom weaving technique of the Bedouins - in national celebrations conveys both national pride and tribal identity. Interpretation in this context must be understood as a plural, affective, and performative act, one that reflects tensions between community-based knowledge and institutional heritage frameworks (Waterton & Smith, 2010).

Together, the above-mentioned conceptual framings illuminate the layered complexity of heritage interpretation in the Arabian Gulf region. They demonstrate that interpretation is not merely a communicative act, but a site of negotiation involving power, identity, memory, and belonging. This choice allows for a deeper understanding of the nuanced aspects of heritage interpretation within processes of selection in a specific context, enabling us to capture the social and political dynamics associated with it.

Results and Discussion

by data gathered from relevant dossiers and documents. Taking the UAE as the focus of this study, heritage interpretation is often institutionalised through state-led initiatives that prioritise international recognition frameworks, notably UNESCO’s heritage conventions. While these efforts seek to consolidate a cohesive national identity, they also tend to privilege commodified and curated expressions of heritage over embodied and community-driven forms of meaning-making. Such processes can narrow the scope of interpretation,

reducing it to heritage display rather than fostering a deeper understanding rooted in community values and lived experience. This section uncovers research results into twofold discussions: who determines heritage interpretation, and the different forms of heritage interpretation in the UAE.

Whose Interpretation?

In the Arabian Gulf region, heritage interpretation reveals how living customs—such as oral traditions, tribal affiliations, craftsmanship, and socioreligious practices—function not merely as relics of the past, but as dynamic expressions through which cultural identity is interpreted, represented, and experienced in daily life. These practices shape national identity through ordinary, lived experiences, aligning with the concept of everyday nationhood (Brubaker, 1996), which examines how individuals engage with, contest, or even disregard national identity in routine acts such as attending heritage festivals, wearing traditional attire, or using dialects and idioms imbued with local meanings (Viejo-Rose, 2011).

Drawing on Hobsbawm and Ranger's (1983) theory of 'invented traditions', it is evident that Arabian Gulf region strategically deploys heritage interpretation to bridge the gap between abstract nationhood and the diverse cultural realities of their populations. To illustrate the constructed and context-dependent nature of everyday cultural practices, the example of nose pressing provides a compelling case of how similar embodied gestures can hold different meanings across cultural contexts, thus challenging the notion of universal cultural identity—as demonstrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Left to right: Limwayah BelKhushoom, Hongi. Source: UAE's National Archive (1963), Unknown Photographer (1914).

Among Bedouin communities in the Arabian Peninsula, this act is referred to in the local dialect as *Limwayah BelKhushoom*, literally meaning confrontation with noses, and is traditionally used as a greeting signifying mutual respect and tribal recognition (AlShaikh, 2024). This greeting is deeply embedded in Bedouin codes of honour and reconciliation, often performed by men during formal or social encounters. Across the globe, a similar cultural gesture exists among the Māori of New Zealand, where the Hongi[2] - a greeting involving the pressing of foreheads and noses - symbolises the spiritual sharing of breath, peace, and unity, performed by both men and women and reflects a sacred exchange between individuals (Dawes et al., 2021). At first glance, these gestures might appear to indicate a shared cultural practice, suggesting the presence of a universal or translatable meaning. However, as Light and Prentice (1994) argue, the interpretation of heritage—particularly intangible practices—is intrinsically tied to questions of ownership, identity, and meaning.

This aligns with Tunbridge's (1984) foundational question 'whose heritage?', which highlights how heritage is not an objective or shared product, but one that is deeply politicised and localised. Heritage elements derive their cultural significance from the sociolinguistic, symbolic, and historical frameworks of the communities that practice them. Thus, while both *Limwayah BelKhushoom* and *Hongi* involve the touching of noses, their meanings, values, and emotional resonances differ greatly, shaped by distinct geographies, social systems, and language particularities. In other words, a shared practice of distinctive communities verifies that *whose heritage* is by itself *whose interpretation*. As Nic Craith (2008) notes, the narrative of shared or universal heritage is often promoted through nationalist agendas that seek to essentialise certain cultural expressions to fit within a unified national or global identity. Consequently, what emerges is a curated vision of culture, one that flattens difference in the name of unity and selectively interprets intangible heritage to serve political discourse.

Forms of Heritage Interpretation in the UAE

Heritage in this context is not simply a reflection of the past, but a dynamic resource mobilised through state planning, cultural institutions, and community practices to generate meanings and identities that are relevant to modern nation-states. The UAE presents a compelling case in which heritage interpretation functions across three interconnected domains: representative, contemporary, and practice-based forms. These forms reflect different interpretive meanings, mechanisms, audiences, and objectives, but collectively contribute to nation-building and reproduction of a united Emirati cultural identity.

Representative forms of heritage interpretation focus on heritage elements that gained international visibility and formal recognition—particularly those inscribed on UNESCO's lists of intangible cultural heritage. Examples of inscribed elements in the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage—shown in Figure 2 (left to right) include *Talli*—traditional embroidery technique, *Majlis*—space of social gathering, and *Ayyala*—a traditional dance performance. These heritage practices are institutionalised and presented through national events, social ceremonials, and cultural diplomacy, projecting a unified cultural identity internationally while fostering pride and continuity domestically. On a broader scale, the institutionalisation of intangible heritage strengthens the meanings and values of selected traditional practices central to national identity. Supportive frameworks—such as cultural policies, registries, training centres, and participatory programmes—facilitate funding, research, production, and engagement with private and international sectors.

Figure 2. Talli, Majlis, Ayyala. Source: Irthi (2020), Abu Dhabi Media Office (2021), Author (2021).

In parallel, *contemporary* heritage interpretation in the UAE involves the integration of heritage into artistic, educational, commercial, and symbolic domains. This form of interpretation, as shown in Figure 3 (left to right), allows heritage to remain relevant to contemporary society, especially among younger generations and expatriate communities. It includes heritage-infused curricula in schools, creative reinterpretations in fashion and design, and the strategic deployment of heritage in branding by both government and private sectors. Art fairs and commissions such as Art Dubai serves as a global platform for contemporary and modern art from the Global South, with a special focus underrepresented artists including heritage artisans from the Middle East, North Africa, and South Asia (MENASA) region. Festivals such as Qasr Al Hosn[3] illustrates how heritage is used to

generate affective resonance with the public and to articulate a modern Emirati identity that bridges tradition and innovation.

Figure 3. Customary social gathering opposite to arranged staged heritage for commercial use. Source: Al-Ghadeer UAE Crafts (2020), Abu Dhabi Department for Tourism and Culture (2021).

Such selective approaches risks marginalising other heritage elements valued by local communities. This selection often entails *heritagisation*[4] that involves selective recontextualization of living heritage, often driven by state interests and global heritage policies. This dual dynamic reveals heritagisation as both a top-down and bottom-up phenomenon, central to the politics of heritage interpretation for commercial, educational, or tourism purposes, with their meanings and production becoming closely tied to the creative economy[5].

Perhaps the most under-recognised but socially embedded form of heritage interpretation in the UAE is *practice-based*, rooted in the lived experiences and oral traditions of local communities—particularly those of tribal affiliation. This includes smithing, traditional games, maritime skills, and desert-based knowledge, as shown in Figure 4. Often transmitted through informal networks of kinship and apprenticeship, these practices operate outside the institutional frameworks of UNESCO or state-driven heritage. While lacking global recognition, practice-based interpretations are integral to the everyday cultural fabric of Emirati society. They reinforce community bonds, intergenerational continuity, and a sense of belonging rooted in place, ancestry, and shared experience. Importantly, these forms of heritage interpretation reflect the agency of communities in maintaining and adapting their own cultural expressions, often in tension with or parallel to state narratives.

Figure 4. Everyday traditional practices performed by Emiratis. Source: Author (2019-2021).

Taken together, these three forms of heritage interpretation demonstrate how nationhood in the UAE is not only imposed from above through symbolic narratives, but also enacted from below through the everyday actions, choices, and values of individuals and communities. The interplay between state-led representation, creative reinterpretation, and community practice produces a multifaceted national identity—one that is continuously negotiated and made meaningful through heritage. This process underscores that heritage in the UAE is both a cultural and political discourse by articulating shared values, and enabling citizens to experience a sense of continuity and distinctiveness in an increasingly modernised world. In this sense, heritage interpretation in the UAE functions as a mechanism of cultural cohesion, national distinction, and everyday nationhood.

Concluding Remarks

This study centres on the interpretive contributions of tribal heritage practitioners — individuals embedded within indigenous knowledge systems — who actively shape, safeguard and interpret intangible heritage in ways that frequently diverge from official narratives. These practitioners offer distinct interpretation approaches to recognising, practicing, and presenting intangible heritage, influenced by the tribe's environmental, cultural, and historical resources, as well as social and linguistic particularities. In the UAE, the county's active role in framing these elements as representative of the nation underscores heritage's function as a political discourse—a tool for nation-branding and cultural legitimisation. Ultimately, this research calls for an expanded interpretive paradigm—a rethinking of professional standards in heritage interpretation to better incorporate grassroots knowledge, lived experience, and community agency. As such, it offers a context-aware interpretation model that is responsive to the realities of contemporary heritage landscapes.

Endnotes

1. The United Arab Emirates, a federation of seven emirates, has transformed from a remote tribal society into one of the Middle East's leading cultural and economic hubs. Retrieved from https://www.government.ae/en/about-the-uae
2. Rooted in the words *ho* (the divine breath of life) and *ngi* (its acceptance).
3. A national festival celebrates the political foundation of the Capital organised by Abu Dhabi Department of Culture and Tourism.
4. A contemporary form of heritage-making process that transforms traditional cultural practices into recognised 'heritage' (Sousa, 2018).
5. For instance, interpreting traditional practices that are mainly inspired by local heritage into staged heritage for tourism purposes. Another example, intangible heritage is frequently used in educational or commercial sectors, interpreted into programming, branding, and products.

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Sacred Past Project: A Study Tour in an Innovative Hungarian Heritage Community Project

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the valuable Hungarian medieval religious heritage in the Gemer region of the former Kingdom of Hungary, now part of Slovakia, and to showcase an innovative approach to community engagement and participation. The Symmetry Foundation has established an active and responsible heritage community in Budapest that is involved in heritage interpretation supported by interpreters and heritage professionals (architects, historians, art historians, archaeologists, monument protection specialists, mural restorers, and museum education specialists) within the Sacred Past project. In this paper, I will analyze a study tour to a village church in the Gemer region, notable for its precious Gothic wall paintings and awarded the European Heritage Label. I will demonstrate how a collaborative heritage interpretation approach enhances the understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of these important religious heritage sites.

Introduction

To address contemporary challenges and raise awareness of, as well as promote, the rich Hungarian medieval religious heritage, the Symmetry Foundation created the Sacred Past project. The Foundation has been organizing international conferences, lectures, presentations, walking tours, and cultural programmes in Budapest, as well as study tours in the Carpathian Basin, encompassing Hungary, Slovakia, Romania, Croatia, and Serbia.

In response to the challenge that many of these religious heritage sites have no interpretation infrastructure and local site interpreters, the Foundation developed a heritage community in Budapest and created a network of interpreters and heritage professionals (architects, historians, art historians, archaeologists, monument protection specialists, mural restorers, and museum education specialists) to facilitate understanding, appreciation, and enjoyment of these religious heritage sites and foster public awareness of the need for their protection and conservation.

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the valuable Hungarian medieval religious heritage in the Gemer region of the former Kingdom of Hungary, now part of Slovakia, and to showcase an innovative approach to community engagement and participation, developing an active and responsible heritage community involved in heritage interpretation and supported by interpreters and heritage professionals during guided tours in the Gemer region.

Theoretical or Conceptual Framework

The Sacred Past project was established in consideration of Hungarian and international regulations, recommendations, principles, ICOMOS and UNESCO Charters, as well as national and European Union strategies in the field of cultural heritage (Börcsök et al., 2023).

“At the broadest level, the natural and cultural heritage belongs to all people” declares the ICOMOS International Cultural Tourism Charter (ICOMOS, 1999). According to its first principle, heritage is a material and spiritual resource, and interpretation programmes should present its significance in a relevant manner, and make it physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally accessible to the general public. The third principle emphasizes that conservation and tourism planning for heritage sites should ensure that the visitor experience will be worthwhile, satisfying, and enjoyable.

The new ICOMOS International Charter for Cultural Heritage Tourism (ICOMOS, 2022) emphasizes that participation in cultural life, with access to cultural heritage, is a human right. One of the seven principles explicitly declares the importance of “enhancing public awareness and visitor experience through sensitive interpretation and presentation of cultural heritage”.

The Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (2005) introduces the heritage community concept. A heritage community consists of people who value specific aspects of cultural heritage. The Convention encourages everybody to participate in the process of identification, study, interpretation, protection, conservation, and presentation of cultural heritage.

The ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation of Cultural Heritage Sites (2008a) recognizes that interpretation and presentation are part of the entire process of cultural heritage conservation, protection, and management. It defines presentation, interpretation, interpretative infrastructure, and site interpreters. Among the seven principles are Access and Understanding, which aim to facilitate understanding and appreciation, and Information Sources to communicate the meaning of cultural heritage sites to the public.

Freeman Tilden, regarded as the father of interpretation, introduced the heritage interpretation concept: “An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1957, p. 8). Tilden established six principles of interpretation. 1. Interpretation should connect the introduced heritage to the personality and experience of the visitor. 2. Information is not interpretation, but revelation based on information. 3. Interpretation is an art that encompasses several disciplines, whether dealing with scientific, historical, and architectural materials. 4. The main objective of the interpretation is not instruction but thought provocation. 5. Interpretation should present a whole, rather than a part, addressing the whole man rather than any phase. 6. Interpretation addressed to children should take a fundamentally different approach.

Tilden’s first principle reflects the psychological theories of constructivism. It describes that any learning process is constructed from the information and knowledge we already have and from our perception of reality (TEHIC, 2025).

Steve Van Matre, an American environmental activist and professor of environmental education and interpretation, considers interpretation as a guiding experience; it “strives to enchant, not merely explain. The role is to translate the language of place experimentally, not teach it” (Van Matre, 2008, p. 11). In his book “Interpretive Design...and the Dance of Experience” (2008), he created an interpretive matrix that documents and structures the essence of the site. Its function is to specify the expected outcomes based on the characteristics and needs of the visitors. The key components of a whole-body experience are related to the head, heart, hands, and hunger.

Methodology

The case study method provides an in-depth and holistic understanding of how a Hungarian heritage community is engaged and actively involved in heritage interpretation while visiting small Slovak village churches with significant Gothic wall paintings but without local site interpreters. During a one-day study tour in Gemer County, the heritage community and the interpreter coming from Budapest together discover, understand, interpret, and enjoy the Hungarian medieval architectural, artistic, historical, and sacral legacy through a complex and joint experience. Applying a collaborative approach in interpretation, the heritage community, consisting of laypeople and professionals, builds a common knowledge based on different disciplines, moderated by the interpreter.

Results and Main Discussion

Preparation for the study tour

The Symmetry Foundation regularly organizes slide show presentations on cultural and religious heritage to arouse interest in participating in a study tour. One of the most popular lectures is about the medieval wall paintings in the Carpathian Basin, especially in the Gemer region of Upper Hungary, now part of Slovakia. In 2022, 12 churches in the Gemer region, decorated with Gothic frescoes, were awarded the prestigious European Heritage Label, highlighting the European significance of these precious medieval murals. Although these village churches represent a valuable religious heritage (some are in use on Sundays and church holidays, while others are out of use), most of them lack professional interpretive infrastructure and site interpreters. Therefore, the Foundation must invite a Hungarian interpreter, Mária Prokopp, a renowned art historian and historian, who is also an expert in medieval wall paintings and the Christian religion. Her captivating, radiant, enthusiastic personality, as well as her love for her profession, always attracts many people.

While travelling in the bus

The interpreter gives an introductory presentation, placing the religious heritage to be visited in a historical context to stimulate interest and understanding of a complex picture.

Arrival at the religious heritage site

Among the village churches awarded the European Heritage Label, in terms of artistic quality, the frescoes of the Karaszkó (Karaskovo) church are the most significant (Prokopp, 2002). Walking up the church hill, the tour participants can admire the monumental image of St. Christopher painted on the outside wall. First, the group walks around the fortified medieval church to get a first impression while they wait to enter the locked building. With the assistance of architects, they then identify and recognise the architectural elements through a collaborative discussion method. Within the almost intact early Gothic church, the wall paintings from the 14th century have a uniquely strong impression and informative value. Upon entering the church interior, everyone first walks around freely, individually, and based on personal impressions, admiring the rich murals, satisfying their immediate individual curiosity. Unfortunately, it is not comfortable for a group of about 40 people to walk around in a small church, especially as a lot of them are eager to take photos of the captivating frescoes immediately. Then the participants summarize the characteristics and architectural elements of the early Gothic church through visual observation and guided questions, with the help of the architects. Inside the sanctuary, there are the twelve apostles

on the north and south walls. On the cross vault, Christ in Majesty is represented, as well as the symbols of the Evangelists. Can anybody recognize the figures depicted in the frescoes? The interpreter tells the stories of the individual compositions depicted in the nave, on both sides of the arch, and the audience has to match the stories and the pictures. The most interesting and captivating fresco is in the upper row on the north wall, depicting a long narrative cycle, the Legend of St. Ladislas (1040-1095), one of the Hungarian holy kings. To understand this monumental and complex wall painting, the interpreter hands out several pieces of paper with various versions of the legend. Following a collaborative method, the small groups must read the text and identify the scenes together. The largest scene is in the centre of the cycle, depicting the battle of Hungarians with the Cumans at Cserhalom. Using the storytelling method, the interpreter, sharing exciting stories about the holy ruler, draws attention to the example of the life of the Hungarian knight king, his European fame and veneration, and the spread of the fresco cycle of the legend throughout the Carpathian Basin. What does ‘Sancti regis Hungariae’ mean? The depiction of the three Hungarian Holy Kings—St. Stephen, St. Ladislas, and St. Emeric—is also widespread throughout the Carpathian Basin. At the end of the visit, the heritage community often sings sacred songs together. In this way, the participants can experience devotion and become emotionally and spiritually involved. A simple black and white flyer is offered in the church that summarizes the history of the church in Hungarian and Slovak. We can take it as a small souvenir.

Processing experiences during breaks

If there is an opportunity, participants also enjoy the local gastronomy after the church visit. During the rest stops, people have the opportunity to process their experiences, ask the experts and the interpreter specific questions, and share their experiences, stories, and knowledge with the community.

On the bus home, the end of the trip

It often happens that some participants share their experiences and stories with the whole community, sing a song, or recite a poem about Saint Ladislas. Scientific literature is passed around on the bus to provide further information for those who are interested in deepening their knowledge. Related religious programmes, exhibitions, guided tours of the Budapest Bible Museum, and sacred concerts in the churches of Budapest are communicated to offer additional opportunities for immersion.

Conclusions and Reflections

The precious Gothic frescoes of the medieval churches in the Gemer region, awarded with the prestigious European Heritage Label, are part of our shared European cultural heritage.

To understand, appreciate, and enjoy their values and the historical and cultural significance, they should be professionally presented and interpreted in a relevant manner, and made physically, intellectually, and/or emotionally accessible to the general public.

The Symmetry Foundation has established a network of interpreters and heritage professionals to help interpret various religious heritage sites that lack local site interpreters. The Foundation's new approach to community building emphasizes a responsible heritage community (consisting of laypeople and heritage professionals) that is not tied to any single site, as defined by the Faro Convention. The members of this community are eager to deepen their knowledge of cultural and religious heritage and actively participate in heritage interpretation.

The all-day study tour offers a collaborative experience with the active involvement of the community in the interpretation. The collaborative approach in interpretation applies various elements: questions, thought provocation, discussion, storytelling, affective learning method, and the involvement of the five senses to make a long-lasting experience. The interpretation of a Gothic church provides a special opportunity for a complex and whole-body experience.

In today's digitalized world, where we increasingly live in virtual relationships through social media, personal and community life in the real world is becoming more valued. According to Tilden, interpretation is an art, and it is to some degree teachable. Heritage professionals are usually not familiar with experiential pedagogical methods, especially for the youth and disadvantaged people. Therefore, it would be most important to do further research, collect best practices of, and develop experiential methods for these groups.

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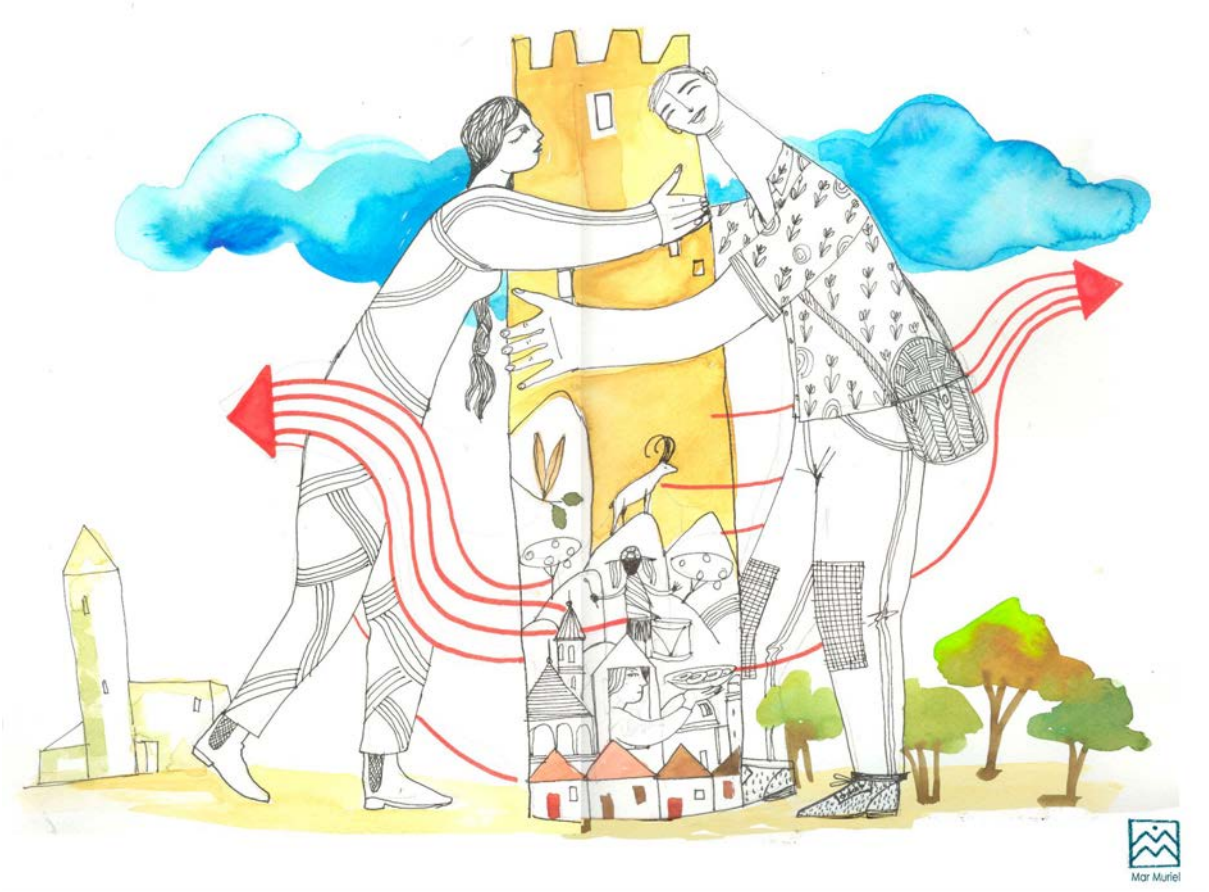
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Consolidation of Professional Competences in the Cultural Sector. A Case Study of Experiences in Monitoring and Evaluation Training

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Abstract

“Musei di Tutti” (Museums for All) is a network of museums in Florence and Fiesole that promotes a transformative vision of cultural institutions as spaces for relationship and co-creation. Their approach to heritage interpretation shifts the focus from objects to people, aiming to activate learning, inclusion, and well-being through participatory and conscious engagement with culture, especially for underrepresented audiences. The project “Ve li raccontiamo noi! I musei visti dai più piccoli” (“We tell you about them! Museums seen by the youngest”) involved children as co-authors of museum narratives, enhancing their creativity, communication, teamwork, and sense of connection to the museum. Within this framework, the University of Florence conducted an action-research initiative to validate the network’s innovative models, positioning museums as catalysts for social change and well-being, and to reflect on the transversal competences of museum educators, crucial for community activation and participatory interpretation of cultural heritage.

Introduction

Cultural institutions today are called upon to take on a multifunctional and socially relevant role that goes beyond the preservation and conservation of cultural heritage (Ashworth, 2011) and become catalysts for well-being, social cohesion and lifelong learning (Falk, 2022; Del Gobbo et al., 2018; Pop and Borza, 2015). They need to adapt to new challenges, such as actively engaging the public and local communities, ensuring accessibility and inclusion, and developing consistent skills among their workforces. Continuous monitoring and formative evaluation of cultural practices is crucial in such processes.

The article describes some of the results of a participative action-research process promoted by the thematic museum network “Musei di Tutti”[1] (Museums for All) in collaboration with the University of Florence. Over the years, this network, made up of six museums[2] in the municipalities of Fiesole and Florence (Italy), has become increasingly aware that museums should shift their focus “from things to people” and make the public’s enjoyment of cultural heritage the main object of their attention and educational activities. The project “Ve li raccontiamo noi! I musei visti dai più piccoli”[1] (We tell you about them! The museums seen by the youngest), launched in 2023 with a first edition for children aged 6 to 10, aims to actively involve this young audience and, consequently, their families, making them protagonists in the planning and realisation of museum visits for their peers. The aim is to develop a personal story about cultural heritage from children to other children and to make them promoters and producers of cultural services and new narratives about cultural heritage.

The following chapters briefly describe the action-research carried out in the framework of this project by the research team of the Department of Educational Sciences of the University of Florence. Experience has shown the importance of consolidating the transversal skills of museum educators for the success of initiatives aimed at community activation and participatory interpretation of cultural heritage (Marconi, 2024).

Conceptual Framework

The approach of the “Musei di Tutti” (Museums for All) network and in particular the project “Ve li raccontiamo noi!” (We tell you about them!), which emerged from the participatory action-research developed by the Department of Education at the University of Florence, fits seamlessly into the current debate on the transformative role of museums in society.

Cultural fruition is still often perceived as an elitist activity reserved for people with a certain background. However, the contemporary debate on the new paradigms of cultural heritage and the holistic function of culture contradicts this view and argues that culture and cultural spaces belong to everyone, as they interweave multiple meanings and levels of interpretation that are accessible to all. The role of the museum today would be to facilitate contact and encounters with the dense universe of meanings contained in cultural artefacts and to strengthen its social function as a “living space” and place of cultural encounter and participation.

The paradigm shift described above in relation to the role of museums in society, finds a solid reference in the process that led to the reformulation of the definition of the term

museum by the international organisation ICOM in 2022. In the new description, the museum is recognised as playing a key role in lifelong learning, inclusion and accessibility in the service of society and communities. These assumptions are reflected in important international conventions in the cultural debate, such as the Faro Convention (2005) and the Convention on Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003), which propose putting people at the centre of cultural processes and activities and emphasising the right to cultural participation and the transmission of heritage, including in innovative ways.

Furthermore, in the new ICOM definition of the term “museum”, the word “sustainability” appears in a particularly significant way, as it is clearly in continuity with the goals of the UN 2030 Agenda, which assigns cultural heritage an active and fundamental role in the areas of education, gender equality, sustainable development, inclusive territorial transformation and intercultural dialogue (ICOMOS, 2021). Moreover, such a new term in the museum definition probably refers to a growing body of literature that recognises the role of culture as a “fourth pillar” of sustainability and sustainable development alongside the three traditional pillars (economic, social and environmental) (Throsby, 2008; Hawkes, 2001), but also as a moderating element of the different areas of sustainability and as a prerequisite for the concept of sustainability itself (Soini and Dessein, 2016; Soini and Birkeland, 2014).

In light of these considerations, it must be emphasised that there is an urgent need to rethink the role, activities and training of cultural professionals working in museums and cultural institutions, focusing on transversal skills that can more strongly emphasise the participatory and co-creative aspects of cultural work. For example, the ability to be guided by the paradigms of sustainability enables museum educators to work with a long-term vision and to integrate cultural activities into broad development strategies of both organisations and territories. Knowledge of programmes and principles promoted by international organisations helps to act according to common standards. At the same time, emotional awareness and the ability to activate value dialogues promote a positive working environment and more effective heritage education techniques. Finally, flexibility and adaptability enable effective work in interdisciplinary programmes that increase the impact on different areas and aspects of cultural activities in the territories.

Developing and raising awareness of transversal competences among museum educators is of strategic importance for the effectiveness of actions to promote the activation and well-being of communities through culture. Likewise, the evaluation of projects and processes developed from this perspective is crucial to understand whether they are truly transformative.

Methodology

The participatory action-research that accompanied the project “Ve li raccontiamo noi!” (We tell you about them!), followed a collaborative and methodologically pluralistic approach (Multi and Mixed Methods, MMMR) (DeJonckheere et al., 2019; Creswell and Clark, 2011; Johnson and Onwuegbuzie, 2004). The team, composed of researchers from the University of Florence, museum managers and educators, developed a research plan to collect evidence on the effectiveness of the educational practices implemented.

The university research unit set two main objectives: to develop common evaluation tools for the project experience, differentiated by target groups (museum educators, children, parents); to identify the elements of project effectiveness and the specificities of the network’s functioning[3]. Two research strategies were chosen, which were carried out in parallel[4]:

1. Participant observation: Creation of three observation sheets to analyse the actions of museum educators, children and parents during the first phase of the project in each museum. The observation sheets were designed taking into account both the objectives of the museum network and the objectives of the university research unit.
2. Administration of questionnaires: design and administration[2] of three separate questionnaires specifically developed for the project and aimed at museum educators, children and parents[5]. The questionnaires were developed through triangulation of data from: participant observation, academic literature and collaborative definition of research evaluation objectives.

The entire process of interpreting the collected data was conducted from an integrated perspective combining the hermeneutic and outcome-oriented paradigm within the team.

Results

The process enabled museum managers and educators to adopt methods and tools to move from an informal assessment of the results of their activities to a data-driven evaluation that demonstrates the degree to which the defined objectives have been achieved. The process, using a "backward" approach, also allowed for a better clarification of the objectives and dimensions of the educational project. This clarification and the resulting awareness formed the basis for critical-reflective processes to analyse, consolidate, improve, and, above all, learn from the experience.

The collaborative experience of participatory action-research led to some recommendations for the future, which the team also considers useful for other museum coordinators or

coordinators of cultural services, museum educators and policy makers. Below is a summary of the key recommendations.

Recommendations for Museum Coordinators or Coordinators of Cultural Services

Supporting education and participation projects through culture requires a strategic and integrated vision that recognises the value of these activities both as a cultural service to the public and as a concrete professional development opportunity for the staff involved. The project objectives should be in line with the cultural policy of the institution and the territory and promote or activate stable and significant collaborations with other territorial realities.

For the project to work well, effective internal and external communication must be guaranteed and favourable conditions must be created for the exchange of knowledge and joint reflection on practises. It is equally important to work with a view to the continuity of the project and to build trusting relationships with the public.

To ensure consistency and quality, it is essential to share the conception, planning and organisation of activities with all stakeholders involved in order to develop a common and shared vision of the project's meaning and objectives. Finally, the promotion of participatory monitoring and evaluation enables the identification of strengths, the detection of points of criticism and the identification of opportunities for improvement with a view to collective learning and the continuous growth of the entire museum organisation.

Recommendations for Museum Educators

The starting point for museum educators is to recognise the central role of the audience. They should maintain an open and receptive attitude to what arouses the curiosity and wonder of the viewership. They should demonstrate the ability to adapt content and methods in response to the stimuli that emerge during the experience and work with participants to define the meaning and direction of the activities.

When planning and running the meetings, it is important to pay attention to the composition of the groups to ensure a meaningful and accessible experience for each participant. During the experience, a balance should also be struck between the educational objectives of the project and the specific needs of the participants.

The environment should be calm to encourage listening and create a welcoming climate that stimulates imagination and a sense of wonder, fundamental elements for engaging and effective learning.

It is advisable to introduce and conclude each activity with a short discussion with the participants; this provides a valuable opportunity to gather feedback and deepen viewpoints.

The evaluation moments can be designed or led by the participants themselves to reinforce their role as protagonists, or they can be worked out with their coordinators or managers.

Finally, it is useful for museum educators to critically reflect on their work and compare themselves with their colleagues and their coordinators or managers in order to improve not only the quality of the proposed activities, but also their pedagogical, relational and planning skills.

Recommendations for Policy Makers

It is crucial that policy makers recognise the strategic role of museums as active and overarching actors within cultural, social, health and educational policies. Museums are not only places where cultural heritage is preserved, but they can effectively contribute to the implementation of integrated public policies that can have a concrete and positive impact on the territory and the people who inhabit it. At the same time, museums can be valorised as important actors within the territorial welfare system, as they are able to respond to needs, activate resources and create paths of integration, well-being and active citizenship.

Conclusions

The project “Ve li raccontiamo noi!” (We tell you about them!) shows the transformative potential of museums when they open up to democratisation processes and put people “at the centre”. The participatory action-research has shown how collaboration between cultural institutions, universities and communities can trigger positive processes of organisational growth, relationship and territorial network building, learning, well-being, skills and professionalism development. In particular, the collaborative approach has made it possible to understand how the transversal competences of cultural practitioners are crucial to respond to the needs of territories and communities for well-being and sustainability.

The collaboratively formulated recommendations presented in this paper provide a practical guide and considerations to promote the active enjoyment of cultural heritage and ensure that museums are valued and recognised as places of debate, dialogue, well-being and sense-making. Ultimately, the work confirms the importance of continuing with new editions of the project and deepening the reflection on evaluation tools and competences needed for the future of the cultural sector.

Acknowledgements

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Endnotes

1. https://www.firenzefiesolemusei.net/
2. The following museums are part of the thematic museum network "Museums for All": Palazzo Vecchio, Stefano Bardini, Innocenti, Bandini, Civic Archaeological, Arena Archaeological and Primo Conti. The network is coordinated by Maria Chiara Berni, Silvia Borsotti, Chiara Ferrari, Arabella Natalini and Valentina Zucchi.
3. https://www.firenzefiesolemusei.net/2023/10/14/ve-li-raccontiamo-noi-i-musei-visti-dai-piu-piccoli-iscriviti/
4. The latter will be discussed in more detail in the results section. The overall results of the participatory action-research are described in the volume: Del Gobbo, G., Marconi, S., Borsotti, S. and Zucchi, V. (2024) *Museums Seen by Children. Experiences of Heritage Interpretation and Community Activation of the "Musei Di Tutti" (Museums for All) Network*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia.
5. The action-research phase took place between September 2023 and May 2024. The "Museums for All" network project was designed in two parts: 1. cycle of co-design sessions and training of children as museum guides for their peers, between October and December 2023; 2. cycle of guided tours by children involved in the project for their peers, between December 2023 and April 2024.
6. Anonymous and in paper form to facilitate completion and ensure accessibility.
7. A total of 67 responses were collected: 32 from the children, 27 from their parents, and 8 from the museum educators involved in the project.

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Participatory Workshops: Exploring Community-Led Models for Vernacular Built Heritage Interpretation in North Africa

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Abstract

Vernacular built heritage in North Africa embodies collective memory(s) and serves as a vector for local knowledge systems. However, it faces numerous challenges related to the neglect of local know-how and the lack of community involvement frameworks. In this sense, participatory workshops emerged as a response to these challenges and enabled the strengthening of heritage interpretation. This practice has become a main vector for creating new collaborative models, ensuring knowledge transfer, and fostering shifts in narratives and public discourse. In this regard, this paper explores participatory workshops as a heritage interpretation approach that contrasts top-down schemes. Drawing on case studies from Algeria, this research highlights the role of participatory workshops in creating sustainable community-led spaces, and underscores challenges of hostile bureaucratic and political environments as well as resource constraints.

Introduction

Vernacular built heritage is a key socio-cultural identifier that embodies the collective memory or memories of communities and serves as a vector for local knowledge systems. Thus, it reinforces the sociocultural continuum across generations. However, this heritage faces significant challenges related to the decline of know-how, the pressures of urbanization, and the lack of community inclusion in institutional frameworks. In the face of these challenges, participatory workshops have emerged as a significant mode of heritage preservation and interpretation in the region. In this context, this paper seeks to examine how participatory workshops serve as both training mechanisms and interpretive practices that foregrounds vernacular knowledge and collaborative meaning-making and presents the preliminary framework and results of a study in progress.

Theoretical framework

Participatory workshops empower communities as stakeholders in transmitting technical know-how and intangible knowledge and safeguarding collective memory or memories. Their organization often arises from local and community-based efforts, addressing gaps left by limited state engagement. These workshops engage communities in decision-making, improving the quality of decisions, legitimacy, implementation and outcomes (Laurian, 2009), and also raise the level of project acceptability (Jacquot, 2009).

On the sociocultural level, participatory workshops improve the communities' sense of belonging and appreciation of their local heritage (Zhong & Leung, 2019), and facilitate networking, collaboration, and informal training in heritage interpretation. More importantly, they challenge the existing power dynamics by promoting decentralized and alternative governance models for heritage interpretation. These aspects gathered enable scalability and replication, and adapt the model of participatory workshops.

In the context of North Africa, community participation stems either from indigenous knowledge through citizen-led initiatives supported by experts, or from institutional bodies that are often driven by unclear or unrevealed agendas (Zerarka & Messaoudene, 2019). In this sense, our reading will be based on these two stakeholders, with a focus on examples from Algeria, as the preliminary case studies are based there.

The emergence of participatory workshops in the region was a response to the significant challenges facing vernacular built heritage. One of the critical issues is the decline and neglect of vernacular know-how as many master builders have abandoned vernacular techniques due to declining demand which created insufficient income for them. This decline is reinforced by the widespread perception of vernacular architectures as outdated.

Furthermore, pressures of urbanization exacerbate this trend, as rapidly expanding cities and changing lifestyles prioritize standardized and fast construction methods. Yet, these methods often come at the expense of environmentally sustainable and culturally rooted practices. Compounding these challenges is the lack of community involvement in institutional frameworks. As noted by Zerarka & Messaoudene (2019), narrow and formal political visions limit broad and inclusive citizen participation, and fail to recognize the crucial role that communities play in heritage interpretation and rehabilitation processes.

Methodology

This paper draws on readings of North African practices and models of community participation, case-based documentation of initiatives in Algeria, and discussions with organizers, participants and experts. The analysis is also informed by personal experience in

co-organizing and participating in rehabilitation workshops in different regions in Algeria between 2016 and 2019, which provided a grounded perspective on the challenges facing this model.

Results

Participatory workshops as a multistakeholder model

Participatory workshops constitute a multistakeholder model for heritage interpretation. It emanates from the efforts of citizen-led initiatives such as national associations, NGOs, or non-registered collectives, on one hand, or from governmental institutions, on the other hand.

Terrachidia (mainly in Morocco); Santé Sidi El Houari (Algeria, enforced closure by public authorities in 2022); and Touiza (Algeria) are relevant examples of associations that organize participatory workshops. They work hand-in-hand with non-registered collectives, particularly to support their administrative and bureaucratic procedures. Among these, Tamazgha Builders and Tourab are two Algerian collectives created in 2015 and 2017, respectively, that go beyond the first act of organizing workshops to that of rediscovering local vernacular architectures and questioning the modalities and contexts through which territory and cities are formed today in Algeria, and beyond.

On the other hand, the example of CAPTERRE (Centre Algérien du Patrimoine Culturel Bâti en Terre) in Algeria is a main stakeholder in this dynamic. This public institution offers support to other initiatives, delivers trainings to professors from vocational training centres, organizes participatory workshops, and implements numerous awareness-raising initiatives on earthen architecture in Algeria, but also in collaboration with international partners such as CRATERRE (Centre International de la Construction en Terre).

Beyond workshops: participatory approaches at the heart of heritage interpretation

Beyond participatory workshops in North Africa, there are other avenues of community engagement for heritage interpretation, using models of digital storytelling, digital mediation, or specialized training programs, among these: the Academy of Traditional Arts in Morocco; the Medina Stories; and Édifices et Mémoires in Tunisia, among others.

Methodological framework of participatory workshops

From these readings, and along discussions with organizers, communities and experts, we could gather a methodological framework of participatory workshops in North Africa, which presents as follows:

- Target participants: Besides local communities, the workshop typically engages young professionals (architects, archaeologists, and cultural mediators) with an initial expertise or interest. It prioritizes diverse regional and cultural backgrounds to help contribute to the emergence of cultural tourism in the region.
- Methodology: The methodology adopted consists of two approaches. The first step is the pre-workshops research which includes interviews with local communities to identify their needs and knowledge gaps, as well as a “hunt for local constructive intelligence”, a very relevant expression used by Tourab, which involves systematically collecting information on indigenous constructive knowledge through informal interviews with elders. Afterwards, the second step is oriented towards hands-on experience by emphasizing practical skills over theory in contrast to institutional training, and involving Mâalems (master builders) to ensure the transmission of expertise.
- Outcomes: The outcomes of this methodological approach include knowledge co-creation as locals transition from being informants to becoming active stakeholders; sustainable solutions as the workshop develops technical preservation methods, alongside interpretation models for vernacular heritage, which later can become “flagship projects”; as well as job integration through partnerships with companies.

Challenges

This research permitted to identify two main levels of challenges of participatory workshops in North Africa, as follows:

- Administrative and political barriers due to a hostile bureaucratic environment with lack of formal consultation frameworks and ambiguous regulations, further exacerbated by institutional neglect with limited support from decision-making bodies that leads to the confinement of projects to small-scale operations.
- Resource constraints as a result of chronic underfunding which leads communities, collectives and organizations to lean on their own organizational budgets, and the overregulation of foreign funding options, especially in the case of Algeria, where without prior governmental approval, such funding can lead to punitive measures such as enforced closure of associations and collectives.

Participatory workshops and heritage interpretation processes

Participatory workshops in Algeria and broader North Africa show how heritage interpretation manifests in collaborative meaning-making as it moves beyond being a method of

communication by becoming a collaborative process that centers communities, how their vernacular heritage is presented and understood, and how their lived experiences, local knowledge and values are reflected. Thus, it contrasts with top-down approaches that marginalize local voices and ignore contextualized knowledge.

In this regard, the model of participatory workshops forms a multidimensional knowledge transfer platform for tangible heritage (skills and techniques), but also as a medium to share oral histories, practices, personal narratives, and memory(s). As a result, it strengthens cultural resilience through intergenerational exchange. On another level, it permits to develop competencies that contribute to professional and specialized pathways in heritage interpretation fields.

Furthermore, this model can lead to narrative and discourse shift as it carries empowering outcomes by fostering inclusive public discourse among communities, experts and institutional stakeholders.

Conclusions and Reflections

Participatory workshops in North Africa foster community-led heritage preservation and interpretation through hands-on training, knowledge sharing, and collaborative meaning-making. Yet, while these contributions are valuable, this model faces practical gaps that may hinder its long-term impact. In this regard, it is crucial not to overlook structural capacity challenges.

What happens when concerned communities are excluded, disengaged, or even resistant? In such cases, we risk reproducing the very top-down, state-driven frameworks that community-led heritage interpretation aims to challenge. As Menzel, Buchecker, and Shulz (2013) argue, establishing trust among stakeholders is fundamental. Without it, efforts at collaboration can quickly collapse, and community involvement may become superficial or counterproductive.

What remains after the workshops end? In many cases, very little. While participatory workshops promote hands-on learning, they often overlook the crucial tasks of documenting processes and creating written archives, resulting in the continued loss of traditional know-how and techniques, and thus, a return to the starting point. This gap also hinders the effective dissemination and preservation of valuable information for future generations.

And finally, how can participation thrive without the tools to support it? It often doesn’t. The lack of communication about ongoing projects and insufficient training in participatory methodologies of organizers, limit meaningful engagement within these initiatives. Without these two essential supports, communication and methodological training, communities and

practitioners alike may struggle to engage meaningfully, undermining the potential for genuine co-creation.

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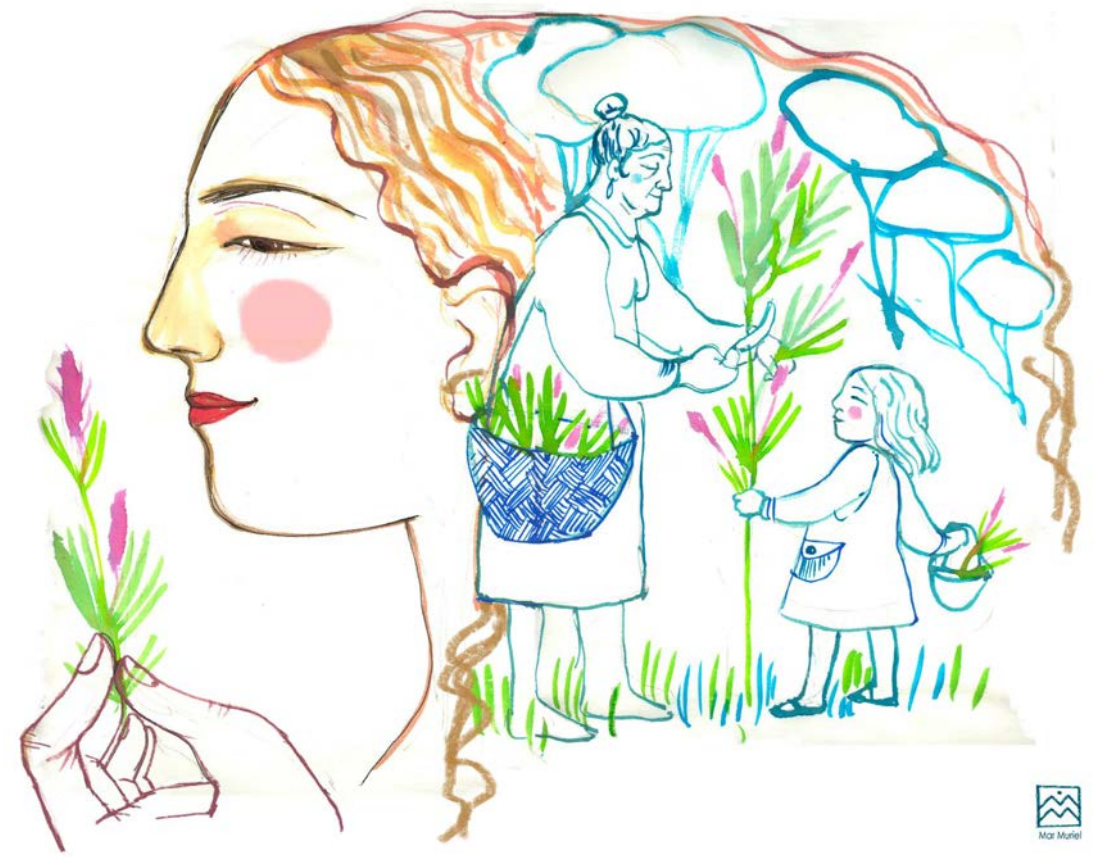
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Teaching Historic Preservation in a Digital World

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Abstract

“Conservation Basics” is a 12-week elective introductory hybrid course at Academy of Architecture in Mumbai, India**,** intended for undergraduate architecture students to nudge more trained conservation professionals into the field. It is designed to have asynchronous readings, visuals and activity-based components, site visits and synchronous discussions over video conferencing, with the city of Mumbai as the experiential laboratory, chosen on account of the city being a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. The students are provided with a glimpse of the vast field of building conservation including urban preservation, World Heritage, Site Management, heritage interpretation and others, with a focus towards understanding the diverse aspects that heritage can be interpreted - from preparing street furniture catalogues after watching old movie songs based on Mumbai to answering a quiz with a twist. All intended towards engaging students to apply their thinking and skills in non-traditional approaches and perhaps generating greater awareness towards teaching a professional field in a unique way.

Introduction

Historic preservation as an elective has been taught in colleges in India before. However, it is always taught in a traditional classroom setting with no contextual adaptation or practical knowledge sharing. There are many post-graduate courses as well which deal with the complexities of historic preservation, and recently only a few have adapted themselves to the changing environment of using digital pedagogical resources to acclimatize towards the need for re-invention – much like the historic buildings themselves who have time and again adapted themselves to the winds of change in the environment. Added to the mix are the seemingly lucrative avenues that other branches in the architectural field pose to that of building conservation, and we have a perfect storm of an enormous wealth of heritage needing attention, coupled with lack of professionals. The result of all this is seen in the decline in intake of students in post-graduate historic preservation courses in India. If, however, an interest was generated amongst undergraduate students in architecture

colleges in the field of conservation, this depletion of specialists could be curtailed, reinvigorating both interest, scholarship, protection and preservation of the built and intangible cultural heritage.

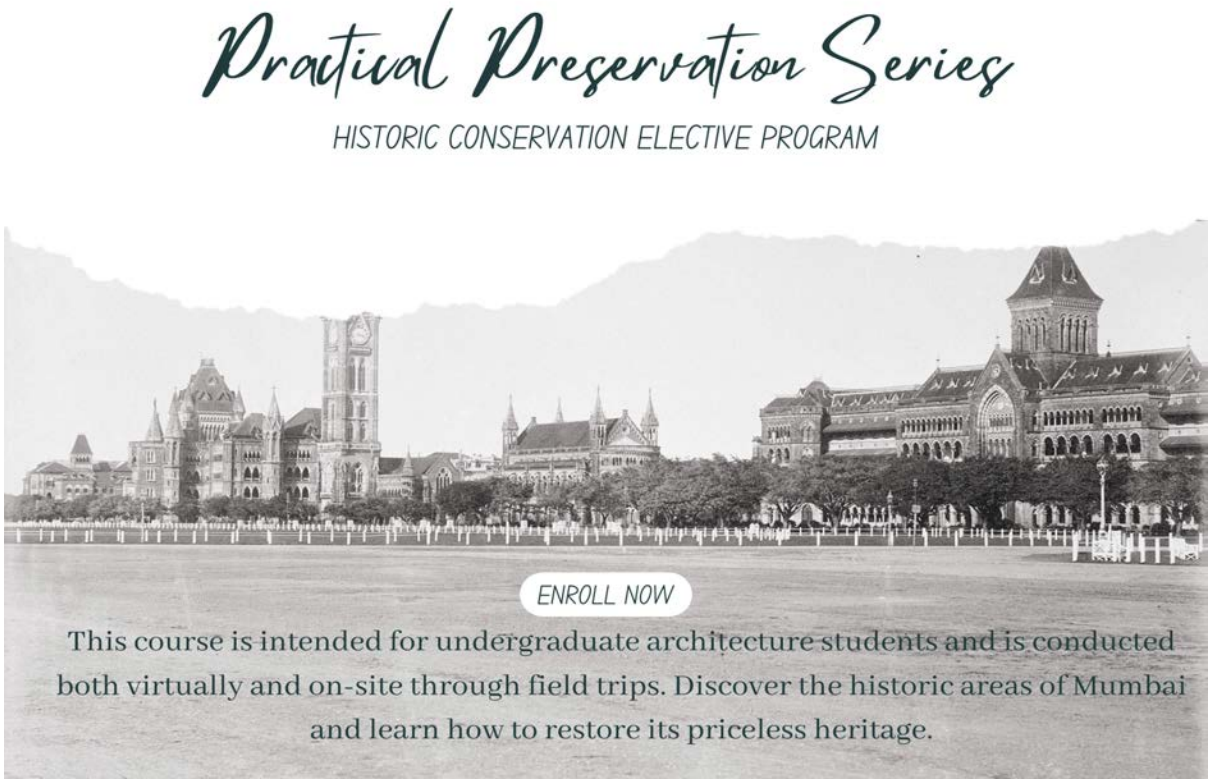


Figure 1: Landing page in LMS Moodle for Conservation Basics – historic preservation elective. Source: Author.

Recognizing this need, I developed a 12-week introductory elective course, taught alongside the regular undergraduate architecture curriculum, to steer more trained conservation professionals into the field. Titled Conservation Basics, this digital tool (using LMS Moodle) is designed to have asynchronous readings, visuals and activity-based components, site visits and synchronous discussions over video conferencing, with the city of Mumbai as the experiential laboratory – chosen on account of the city being a UNESCO designated World Heritage Site. However, this model can be adapted and applied to any historic site. A pilot of this project was implemented successfully in December 2023, where 22 undergraduate students at the Academy of Architecture, Mumbai, India, were introduced to historic preservation using a model of 5 in-person classes, 5 on-line sessions and 2 office visits. The students were provided a glimpse of the vast field of building conservation including urban preservation, World Heritage, Site Management and others – providing just a little taste of the profession, the research it entails and the absolute joy of working with such a medium as

a historic space. Conservation Basics is intended towards engaging students to apply their thinking and skills in non-traditional approaches.

Conventional Approaches to Teaching: Historic Preservation Elective 1.0, the 2006 Version

In 2006, I was asked to teach historic preservation as an elective to eight 4th year undergraduate architecture students at the Bhausaheb Hire College of Architecture in Mumbai, India. It was the first time that this topic for an elective was to be taught here and hence the department was unable to provide a structure or curriculum, nor content. Hence, it was up to me to devise a course that would foster better understanding of this complex and interesting subject, which was to be taught for about 12 weeks with one 90 min class per week. This was my opportunity – to share practical approaches to theoretical knowledge in the field.

Figure 2: Undergraduate architecture students on an architectural walking tour in Mumbai with instructors in 2006. Photo: Author.

Over the course of 3 months, I took these students to the historic districts of Mumbai, explained the urban morphology of this ever-changing city, and demonstrated conservation practices on live projects that I was working on at the time. The elective course was interspersed with classroom lectures and on-site visits, culminating in research papers, condition assessment surveys and architectural drawings, with segments on World Heritage Site designations. To me as an educator, contextual history and making connections between sites, people and cultural expressions of the time with the current generation is critical towards acknowledging our past and making it relevant for the custodians of the future. Hence, it is important to invest carefully into curating future professionals by developing today's students as inheritors of their legacy.

Covid and Post-Covid Teaching Philosophy

That the Covid-19 pandemic changed the way the world operates is an understatement. Both during and the after math of the pandemic has resulted in some of the most irrevocable alterations in our personal and professional lives. This was acutely felt in developing countries such as India, which was badly hit because of the spread of the contagion as well as the near complete lockdown for months. To shift overnight to in-person without basic infrastructure, given the lack of technological equipment, was going to be an uphill task.

While we may never go back to fully remote teaching for regular schools and colleges (as initiated during the pandemic), the benefits of virtual meetings and ease of dissemination of online courses are unprecedented. It was in 2021 when I enrolled in the two-year fully online Digital History graduate certificate program at George Mason University, where I was able to tackle the issue of online teaching of historic preservation and mass distribution to create better opportunities. The unlimited potential of teaching using the medium of digital tools has made it possible to even think about this unthinkable (for me) concept of a virtual conservation course, which I had completely dismissed as being improbable before doing the digital certificate course. It needed a change in approach, in a mind-set based on traditionalist thinking of conducting classes.

The challenge as educators lies in changing our approach towards teaching architectural history, especially the digital version. In a sense, it is relearning how to interpret heritage even for teaching in a digital medium. This is particularly valid in the case of my digital teaching project, in which I want to touch upon broad concepts of historic preservation, explain what and how to conserve, provide good examples of restored projects and end with international mechanisms for ensuring long term conservation of historic districts. Digital tools have helped to the extent that these are varied and expansive, providing the possibility of bringing into the classrooms (or home computers) components that are not possible in traditional settings. The ease with which historical data can be presented and interpreted with the help of digital resources has been the deciding factor to prepare the course work for this project.

Building *Conservation Basics* – the Historic Preservation Elective Circa 2023

While the primary structure of my 2023 historic preservation elective remains the same as the 2006 version, the fundamental difference between the two using the huge evolving technological jump that the interpretation industry has witnessed in the decade in between, from using augmented reality to podcasts and walk-throughs. The 12-week (one 90 min class per week) elective is broadly divided into 3 modules – Urban History (UH),

Architectural Conservation (AC) and Cultural Heritage Preservation (HP). The UH and HP modules are 2 weeks each and the AC module is 4 weeks. Within these modules are sub-topics dealing with city development, architecture styles, built heritage documentation, condition assessment, material conservation, adaptive reuse, World Heritage Sites nominations and interpretation tools.

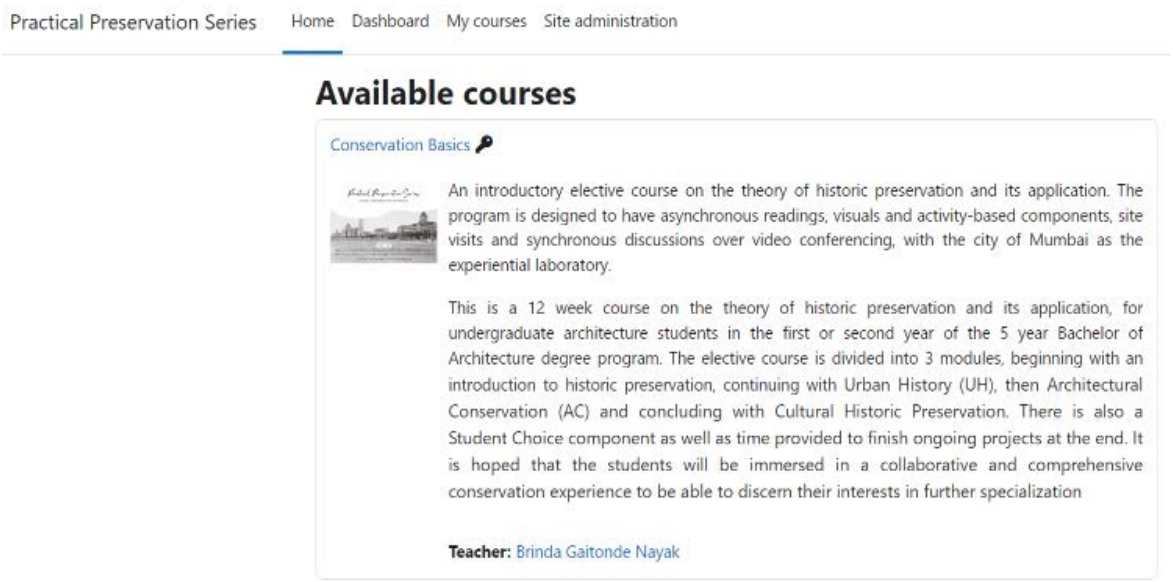


Figure 4: LMS Moodle is a universal digital resource which provides necessary tools for conveying lessons, with immense flexibility of posting assignments and grading.

However, the content or presentation was not my main challenge. Somewhere during the making of *Conservation Basics,* I had that nagging feeling that what I wanted to convey may not be fully achievable in a digital format, because of the nature of the course I had chosen to adapt.

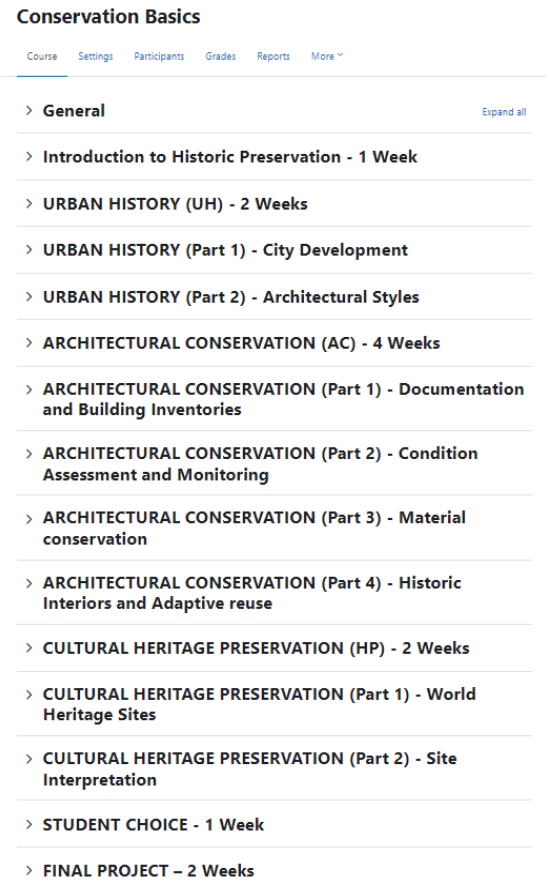


Figure 5: The structure of the elective displaying the various modules and their sub-sets. Source: Author.

Implementing the Pilot

In December 2023, I was asked by the Academy of Architecture in Mumbai, India, to teach Conservation Basics to 20 undergraduate 3rd -year architecture students as an elective. By then, I had decided to conduct the course in a hybrid format using my time in India to get to know the students and their interests, teaching them contextual architectural history by taking them on a heritage walk, explaining building defects and remedies on site and preparing condition drawings. During the 5 weeks I was in Mumbai, I met the students at the college, on site and at a local conservation group's office. Parallelly, they did asynchronous readings of the material I had posted on Moodle and submitted assignments online. By doing their own versions of crafting a walk route, I taught them ArcGIS Storymaps and how to analyze changes in city growth through using overlapping maps, both archival and current, with JuxtaposeJS.

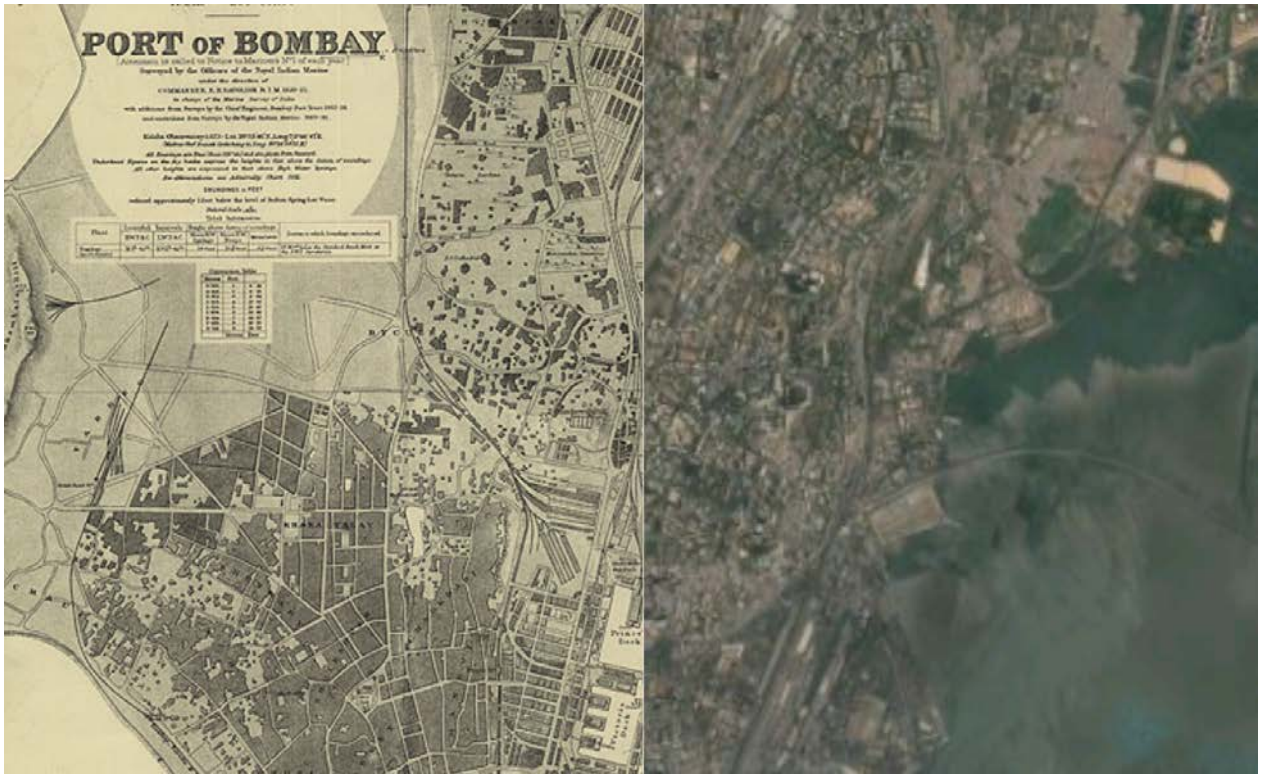


Figure 6: Using JuxtaposeJS to compare a 1933 map of Bombay with a current google earth image. Such assignments with overlays of archival maps with current drawings have led to a better understanding of the extensive development that Mumbai has seen through several reclamation and infrastructure projects. Source: Author.

The second section on Architectural styles (within UH) further develops the walking tour to introduce building styles, typologies, construction dates and other historical data within the digital mapping tool. Interspersed with readings and field trips, each module is devised with a view towards introducing a different digital tool, primary resource, peer reviewed writing and other media. This varied, immersive, collaborative and derivative experience for each module using both traditional teaching methods and digital tools will hopefully create multiple learning opportunities for students, thereby laying ground for further investigative historical thinking applicable to other settings.

We now get into the largest component of the elective course, which is that of Architectural Conservation (AC). It is divided into sections covering documentation and preparation of building inventories, assessing the built fabric and marking defects, conservation of historic material and adaptive reuse of heritage areas. This section is in essence the most critical part of developing an understanding of how historic preservation is undertaken for building sites and urban areas. When I first framed this module, I found it quite tricky, in the sense that it involves some deft management of the on-site component of teaching students to undertake condition surveys. When I conducted this course for the first time in 2006, I took the students to site and had them mark out the defects and issues affecting the built fabric

onto printed drawings. Circa 2023, through much soul searching, I decided to stick with the practical component of being in-person for this section of the course.

Figure 7: Images of students at the Gateway of India examining ongoing restoration, conducting visual inspections and at the UDRI offices to understand conservation policies and the preparation of the Mumbai WHS dossier. Photo: Author.

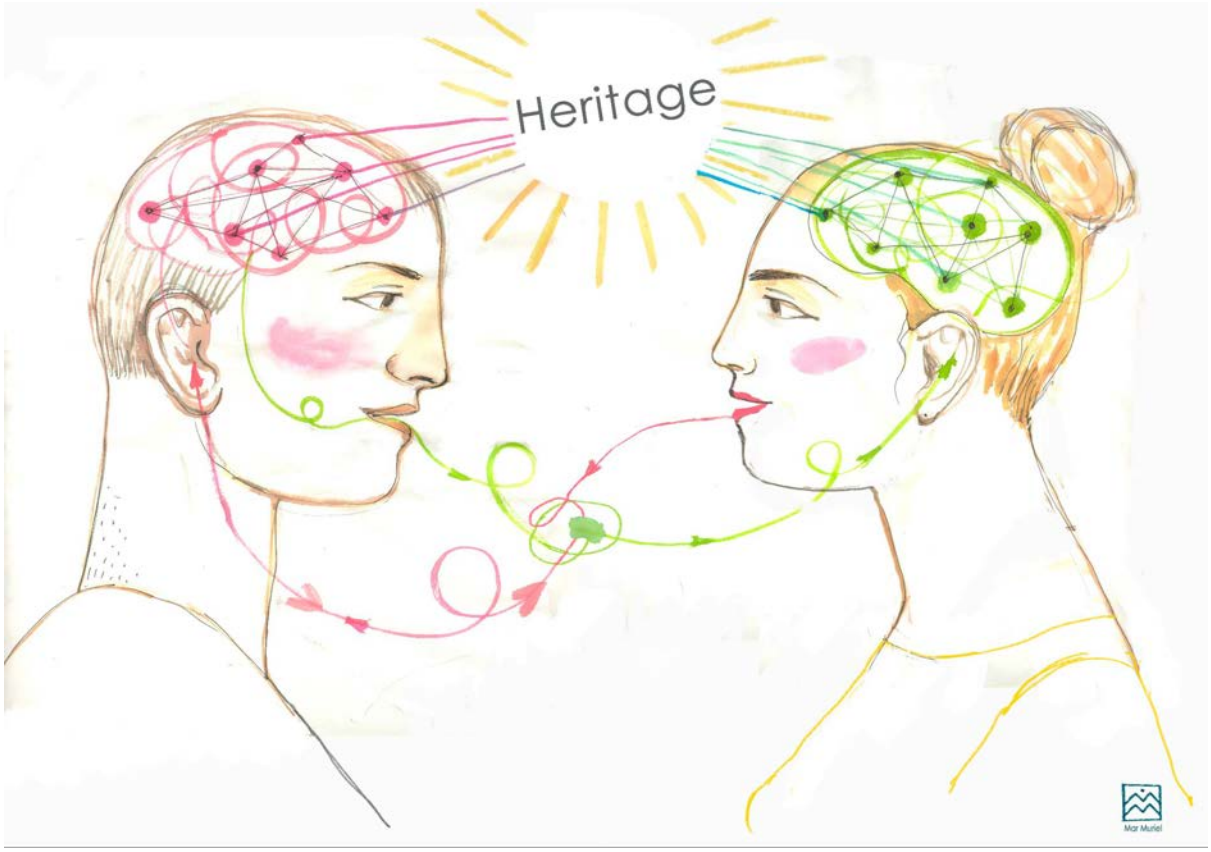
Having resolved this, I used traditional instruction methods for teaching students to identify defects, undertake condition assessments and devise methodologies for cultural fabric preservation. I used access to on-going restoration projects in Mumbai to explain these issues on-site and actual historic sites were studied for building inventories and condition surveys that each of the students were required to complete. Having completed the in-person component of 5 sessions of the elective, the digital project was set to move into the realm of online learning.

Part of the AC module and the entire HP module are taught online. It follows the same precedent of online asynchronous reading, a 90-min class in which the students are instructed by me, participate in quizzes, watch videos and other interactive media. I have provided variations in each teaching module - from preparing street furniture catalogues after watching old movie songs based on Bombay to answering a quiz with a twist and the activity I devised - *“Spot the indifference”* in which the student has to compare archival and

contemporary images of Bombay buildings and identify missing details, incongruous additions etc. The students get to watch trailers of movies that feature World Heritage Sites; the most infamous being the one in which Daneil Craig is shown scaling the walls of the Mexico City World Heritage Site in the James Bond movie *Spectre* before the entire city is blown to bits. The students were amazed at the diverse applications of heritage interpretation and evolved their own unique assignments.

Lessons Leared

I am now in the 3rd year of teaching this course in India. I thoroughly enjoyed teaching this course and hope the students have too. Although, online teaching is still not my preferred mode, I have come to terms with the many benefits it affords – access to a variety of digital tools being one of them. Integrating digital modes of heritage interpretation into this elective has demonstrated how meaning-making tools can deepen student engagement, broaden their analytical abilities, and encourage more imaginative connections with historic places, an essential step in cultivating the next generation of conservation professionals. The transition to online was challenging but interesting in how the students (and me) adapted to a different mode of instruction and interpretation. I hope the fundamental goal of initiating a steady stream of conservation professionals will reach fruition through this course.


Heritage
Mar Muriel

Community Heritage Interpretation and Sustainability of Heritage Sites: A Case Study of Swat, Pakistan

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Abstract

There is a significant association of sustainability of heritage sites and community heritage interpretation. Primarily, in those territories where socio-religious and socio-cultural disparities are prevalent. This study, in acquiesce to such juxtaposition of heritage sustainability and community heritage interpretation, substantiated the cultural narratives of Muslim community in Bazira, Swat, Pakistan through storytelling method, within the qualitative research strategy. Given the religious and cultural variances between the residing Muslim communities and Buddhist heritage site of Bazira, Swat, this study ascertained how the local community interprets the tangible and intangible dimensions of Buddhist heritage in comparison to their own culture. The storytelling format of data collection through open-ended interviews revealed several semblances of architecture, wearables, and agriculture between the ancient Buddhist and existing Muslim communities. Given such cultural continuity, the current Muslim community advocates for and contributes to the sustainability of these sites. The study concludes with relevant implications and future research avenues.

Introduction

Cultural identity is a set of values, traditions, beliefs, practices, and celebrations that are distinctive to a certain community. It is an expression of one’s place in the world which shapes the belongingness by the local/community about themselves and their settings (Richards, 2007). Concomitantly, as Lahti (2013) narrated, the cultural identity is a complex and contextually unfolding process of knowing yourself in terms of history, symbol, meanings, and practices in comparison to others including colleagues, subordinates, supervisors, customers, and business partners. Based on these definitional clarities, it can be asserted that cultural identity connects individuals or groups to their respective cultural and natural heritage and influences their lifestyle and interaction with others. Similarly,

tangible and intangible facets of such heritage play a significant role in shaping and portraying cultural identity. For instance, cultural identity has an intrinsic link to the sustainability of heritage resources, and in return, the preservation of these resources ensures the sustenance of cultural identity. Moreover, for the transmission or narration of cultural identity, cultural narrative/s serves as an important medium. Since cultural narratives are stories shared by the community to have reflective transmission of cultural values, these narratives also contribute to shaping perceptions of history, morality, and social obligations (Bamberg, 2005). Haven (2007), while emphasizing on these cultural narratives, acknowledged that storytelling is the usage of a lingual and gestural expression to convey cultural identity constructs for the purpose of entertainment and education. Smith and Waterton (2013) further linked the storytelling in the paradigm of heritage, and, specified that it facilitates emotional engagement with the past which helps communities to articulate their cultural identity that is associated with tangible and intangible heritage, and, through such interpretive process, storytelling shapes the valuation of heritage. Given this, the community possesses an inherited sense of ownership of the heritage which further strengthens their custodianship role for the sustainability of these resources, eventually contributing towards the specific agenda of sustainable development goal 11 – *Sustainable Cities and Communities*, particularly the sub-target 11.4 - *Protect the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage*.

Conceptualizing Community Heritage Interpretation

The interpretation of heritage is a complex process and is engrained deeply within the local community. Such interpretation by the local community hinges on the tangible and intangible dimensions of heritage. Moreover, such interpretation has an underlying significance based on socio-cultural, socio-religious, and socio-geographical factors. The definitional clarity of heritage has been described by UNESCO's World Heritage Interpretation and Presentation Centre (WHIPIC) as:

> "Heritage interpretation is a meaning-making process through communication, participation and experience. It increases understanding and promoting connections between people and heritage places. In the decision-making process of what is interpreted and how, it premises heritage interpretation based on an ethical and participatory approach and a consideration of the full range of heritage values including those of outstanding universal value (OUV) and community-held values" (WHIPIC 2022, p. 44).

Similarly, community heritage interpretation (CHI) gravitates around narratives and perspectives by the community to interpret and promote their respective tangible and

intangible heritage. Community heritage interpretation is a systematic process which enables the local community to engage, present, and communicate the cultural and historical meanings of their (tangible and intangible) heritage to others (Smith, 2006). Such positive association of local community and heritage during the heritage interpretation has upsides for tourism as well as for the attainment of sustainable development goals 2015-2030.

Pertinently, for the regions where the local community has differences with their surrounding heritage, such synergy of community heritage interpretation and sustainability is of paramount significance. For instance, in Swat where the majority Muslim community resides around Buddhist heritage of Gandharan civilization, having religious, lingual, and cultural disparities. In such cases, community heritage interpretation has some remarkable facets, compelling the research community to explore such juxtaposition of heritage interpretation and sustainability, and unveil novel scientific dimensions pertaining to the socio-cultural and socio-religious domains. This study, intended to explore the underlying dimensions of the duality of heritage interpretation and sustainability. In the socio-geographical context of Bazira, Swat, Pakistan (Figure 1), heritage interpretation of Muslim Pakhtoon community with reference to Buddhist's tangible and intangible heritage has been explored, and its impact on sustainability of these heritage sites has also been corroborated.

Figure 1: Bazira, Barikot, Swat – Geographical Context. Source: Google Maps.

Method

This study used qualitative research strategy to explore the heritage interpretation of community. Through a hybrid approach of interview storytelling, narratives of the local community were recorded. A total of 20 members from the local community were interviewed during the data collection phase. Later, these narratives were converted into transcripts and from these transcripts, while following the pattern of thematic analysis, nodes, sub-nodes, and themes were generated.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of the transcripts resulted in the creation of several themes which are mentioned below, supported by verbatims.

Socio-religious commonalities of Buddhism and Islam

Swat remained an abode of different civilizations which became extinct due to social and natural factors. Due to the existence of these civilizations, in contemporary times, there are several commonalities (between Buddhism and Islam) which have been outlined by the local community while interpreting their current understanding of tangible and intangible heritage. For instance, they mentioned dressing (Figure 2 and Figure 3), crafts similarities, and architectural semblances particularly in the religious structures (Figure 4 and Figure 5).

> *[…While I was visiting the Swat Museum, I came to know about a very interesting fact that the carvings on the jewellery and shapes displayed in galleries are almost similar with the jewellery found in the Swat. Also, the dressing is also similar to current dressing although centuries have passed…]*

Figure 2: Traditional Ancient Dress and Figure 3: Modern Pakhtoon Dress. Source: Authors

> *[…Here in our area we have narrow streets and the style of home is the living rooms are one side with an open veranda and a water reservoir on the left side of the home. In our old mosques, the wooden pillars are engraved with certain*

designs. When I compare these with the architecture of the Buddhists and Hindu Shahi period, same style of homes was followed, and the wooden engravings are also almost identical…]

[…We and the civilizations passed here, have a very strong cultural link. It seems that 'religion' is the only change the time has brought, as we are now Muslims and they were Buddhists, Hindus…]

Figure 4: Replica of Ancient Buddha Dome in Swat Museum, and Figure 5: Saidu Sharif Mosque, Swat. Source: Authors.

However, some community members disagreed with socio-religious associations and narrated that these similarities exist due to geographical utilisation of the land of Swat by these different civilizations.

[…There is very much difference between the architect of those people and ours, we are Yousafzai people and came from Afghanistan. We have a separate culture and social system. Some resemblance in the architect is due to the fact that Swat remained the passage for civilizations. On behalf of these some matching architects, we cannot assign a relationship. Above all, we can say about this resemblance as 'Legacy of land, but not legacy of people…]

Heritage Stewardship through Heritage Interpretation

The local community, in response to dimensions of heritage stewardship and sustainability, opinionated that they consider themselves as the inherited custodians of the tangible and intangible heritage facets. Such interpretation of heritage resonates with the sustainable development goals, primarily with the SDG 11 - Sustainable Cities and Communities and sub-target 11.4 - Protect the World's Cultural and Natural Heritage.

[…I consider myself custodian of this site because it is our cultural legacy. The depletion of this site means my culture will be at stake. This site is my cultural asset and I will protect it from any threat…]

[…I feel myself a custodian of this site. I can convince a person even from the United Kingdom who I am and where my cultural history connects to. This site is a representation of my cultural identity. Without such sites, it will be difficult for me to recognize myself…]

Conclusions and Reflections

There is significant association between cultural identity, heritage sites, and local community's interpretation of tangible and intangible facets of heritage. This study, while presenting the findings from the renown heritage site of Bazira, Swat, highlighted the community heritage interpretation with reference to the (Buddhist) heritage sites in their surroundings. The perspectives of the local community asserted a strong connection and similarities between the existing Muslim culture and heritage site related to Buddhism. Given this immense relationship, the local community consider themselves as the custodian of these tangible and intangible facets of heritage, contributing towards the sustainability of these sites. Furthermore, such interpretation echoes a sense of religious cohesion among the Muslim majority area about the Buddhist heritage sites, although there are sizeable theological differences between the Islam and Buddhism.

In addition, this study, although limited to one heritage site with a smaller number of participants, offers implications for academicians, legal stakeholders, and industry professionals. Particularly, concerning the need of professionalization to further strengthen the association of community heritage interpretation and sustainability of heritage sites (in the specific case of Bazira and generally for other sites as well), a skill-development framework could be developed, which can organize community collaborative workshops. Given this, the local community would be more interested and mobilised for the sustainability of such heritage sites. Regarding the educational need, courses, and modules reflecting on the significance of community heritage interpretation for sustenance of heritage sites would be offered for graduates. Lastly, for academics and research communities, future studies can take the lead from this study and would unveil additional findings through the mixed method by employing quantitative data as well.

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Beyond Stories: Interpreting the Pattada Mancha as Living Heritage in South Canara

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Abstract

This study explores the heritage narratives embedded in South Canara's furniture traditions, focusing on the Pattada Mancha, a ceremonial throne chair dating from the 17th to early 20th centuries. Through ethnographic fieldwork and heritage interpretation (HI), the research examines its ornamentation, placement, and symbolism, revealing connections to hierarchy, spirituality, and craftsmanship. The paper shows that without contextual interpretation; such objects risk being reduced to decorative artifacts in museums. Drawing from semi-structured interviews and visual analysis, it demonstrates how furniture acts as a cultural storyteller, sustaining community memory and identity. The study contributes to HI by presenting context-driven strategies for interpretation, positioning furniture as a dynamic medium for transmitting cultural values. It underscores the role of heritage professionals in ensuring these objects remain living symbols rather than static displays.

Introduction

Material culture encompasses more than just practical utility; it serves as a crucial channel for societies to encode cultural values, transmit community beliefs, and assert collective identities. Although furniture might appear mundane, it represents one of the richest domains for heritage interpretation, precisely because it is woven into the fabric of daily life while fulfilling deeply symbolic roles. In South Canara, a region located along the southwestern coast of India, the Pattada Mancha stands out as a vivid example of this dual character serving both everyday needs and representing broader social and ritual significance.

Historically, the Pattada Mancha was strategically placed in the Chavadi (veranda) of Beedu and Guttu households, which were elite manor houses forming the backbone of rural authority and governance. Between the seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries, prior to the abolition of local governing systems by British colonial authorities, this ceremonial chair occupied a central place in various life-cycle rituals -including weddings, major community

festivals such as Bootharadhane, and even dispute resolution meetings. It functioned as more than a seating arrangement; the Pattada Mancha played an active role in legitimizing authority, providing ritual endorsement, and embodying cosmological order within the community's worldview.

Currently, surviving Pattada Mancha's are mostly preserved as cherished heirlooms, displayed for their symbolic value, or kept in museum collections, reflecting the changing context and function of these objects. This transformation prompts important questions about the fate of ritual objects when they are no longer in active use, and the challenges inherent in communicating their layered meanings to contemporary audiences. Addressing these concerns, this paper investigates heritage interpretation strategies designed to re-in still meaning, amplify community voices, and ensure the ongoing relevance and continuity of such cultural symbols.

Figure 1. Kamshetty (2016). Pattadada mancha [Photograph]. Personal collection.

Figure 2. Kamshetty (2016). Yajamana Sitting on Pattadada mancha [Sketch]. Personal collection.

Conceptual Framework

Heritage interpretation (HI) is central to this inquiry, understood here as a process that seeks to reveal deeper meanings behind objects and sites rather than simply presenting descriptive facts. Interpretation can be considered a dialogic process shaped by interactions between objects, communities, and audiences. Similarly, Smith (2006) examines how relationships between material heritage and audiences evolve through interpretative engagement, though their focus is not exclusively on heritage interpretation in the museological sense.

This study draws on several conceptual strands to frame the analysis. The notion of living heritage is informed by UNESCO's position that heritage is neither static nor finite, but instead continuously practiced, adapted, and negotiated within communities. In this light, objects such as the Pattada Mancha are inseparable from the rituals, social hierarchies, and collective memories that give them meaning. Dudley et al. (2011, pp. 12–15) highlight the material and intangible nexus, noting that the sensory and physical qualities of heritage objects are intertwined with intangible dimensions such as beliefs, rituals, and identity-making practices.

In the realm of critical museology, Macdonald et al. (2006, p. 1-25) caution that museums often isolate objects from their lived contexts, thereby risking the reduction of these artefacts to mere aesthetic curiosities. Finally, scholarship on community interpretation for example,

Dawson (2017, p. 142) emphasizes the active role of community members in co-constructing heritage narratives, ensuring that they remain authentic, relevant, and grounded in lived experience.

Through this combined framework, the Pattada Mancha emerges not simply as a piece of decorative furniture, but as a cultural signifier that is simultaneously material and symbolic, embedded in both historical traditions and contemporary practice.

Methodology

The study utilizes an ethnographic and interpretive methodology, integrating archival research, oral histories, and visual documentation. Fieldwork was conducted across five households in South Canara that maintain ceremonial chairs. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with elders, carpenters, and custodians to trace ritual functions, beliefs, and symbolic interpretations. Oral histories documented narratives of weddings, dispute settlements, and festivals where the chair was significant. Visual documentation included sketches and photographs analyzed for ornamentation, motifs, and spatial settings, while archival research drew on historical manuscripts, colonial reports, and photographs to contextualize the evolution of the chair. The methodology prioritizes community voices and respects cultural sensitivities, ensuring consent and collaborative interpretation to maintain accuracy and avoid reductive appropriation.

Results and Discussion

Ornamentation as Cultural Code

The Pattada Mancha features elaborate carvings that visually express important aspects of cosmology and authority within South Canara’s heritage. Crocodile motifs sculpted onto the armrests are not merely decorative; they symbolize protection, law, and jurisdiction, providing a constant reminder of the order and governance the chair embodies. Floral patterns scattered across the surface represent auspiciousness, inviting positive energies and blessings into ritual contexts. Geometric borders frame the chair, effectively marking out a designated ritual space and reinforcing its ceremonial significance. Some chairs even display Panjurli (wild boar spirit) imagery, directly connecting the artifact with animistic deities from Tulu culture and enriching its spiritual resonance. Through such ornamentation, the Pattada Mancha acts as a visual script, communicating legitimacy and blessings to all who encounter it, while reinforcing its status within both sacred and social domains.

Spatial Context and Ritual Authority

The placement of the chair in the Chavadi, a transitional space between the private domain of the household and the broader community significantly elevated its authority and symbolic meaning. The Chavadi itself operated as a semi-public forum where key rituals and governance activities unfolded, positioning the chair as a powerful emblem of both domestic leadership and communal responsibility. During major festivals such as Bootharadhane, the chair was honoured with offerings of flowers and lamps, underscoring its status as a spiritual guardian central to communal rites. In matrimonial ceremonies, the tradition of presenting the first wedding invitation to the chair further accentuated its pivotal role as both a witness and a legitimizer of familial alliances, thereby integrating spiritual reverence with social protocols in the everyday fabric of South Canara society.

Heritage Narratives and Identity Politics

Beyond its ritual role, the Pattada Mancha also plays a critical part in consolidating social identity and preserving lineage memory within elite households. Its continued presence is a marker of cultural distinction, as it physically anchors authority and heritage within the material environment of the home. Dawson (2017) notes that heritage objects serve as vessels for collective memory, actively shaping shared identities across generations. The chair represents both continuity of tradition and subtle forms of resistance, especially in periods marked by colonial disruptions; despite the imposition of new legal and administrative systems under colonial rule, the Pattada Mancha remained a symbol of indigenous authority and cultural persistence in domestic settings

Museum Detachment and Interpretive Gaps

When the chair is relocated to museums, it often risks being perceived merely as a decontextualized aesthetic object rather than as a vibrant cultural symbol. While visitors might appreciate its craftsmanship, they frequently overlook the deeper ritual, spiritual, and political meanings that once infused the Pattada Mancha with significance. Macdonald (2006) describes this phenomenon as “epistemic flattening,” warning that such practices strip artifacts of their original cultural vitality and context. Without adequate interpretive tools such as oral histories, community narratives, or digital reconstructions the Pattada Mancha may be reduced to “just a chair,” underscoring the necessity for thoughtful interpretive interventions that restore its layered meanings for contemporary audiences

Comparative Perspectives

Comparisons with other ceremonial furniture enrich understanding. In Kerala, the Nettipattam (ornamental elephant headgear) functions as a ritual object imbued with authority. In Sri Lanka, carved seats in Buddhist monasteries embody spiritual legitimacy. Such examples reveal a wider South Asian tradition of furniture as cultural semiotics. The Pattada Mancha fits within this continuum, offering insights into regional practices of materializing authority.

Toward Inclusive Interpretive Praxis

To bridge gaps in interpretation, participatory and multimodal strategies are essential. These include community co-curation by involving descendants and local custodians in exhibition planning to ensure authentic representation. Oral history archives play a key role by recording and integrating elders' narratives into interpretive displays, preserving the living memory associated with objects. Digital storytelling methods like augmented and virtual reality can recreate the Chavadi setting, situating the ceremonial chair within its spatial and ritual context for immersive audience engagement. Educational programs involving schools and universities help explore such furniture not just as decoration but as heritage embodying cultural significance. These strategies collectively reanimate the object as a living heritage actor, ensuring it remains relevant to contemporary audiences while respecting its deep cultural roots.

Conclusions and Reflections

The Pattada Mancha is a compelling example of how furniture in heritage contexts transcends mere functionality, embodying layers of authority, ritual symbolism, and identity within a community. Historically serving as both a seat of judgment and a platform for blessings, the Pattada Mancha's role has evolved, yet it continues to resonate as a fragile yet powerful heritage symbol. Its transformation from utilitarian object to revered artifact invites reflection on how tangible objects can become vessels of social meaning and collective memory.

This research underscores that effective heritage interpretation is vital for converting static artifacts into narrative-rich, immersive experiences that foster deeper understanding and engagement. By actively incorporating community voices, memories associated with rituals, and culturally embedded symbolic meanings, heritage interpretation facilitates the continuity of intangible heritage alongside the physical preservation of objects. Such approaches recognize that heritage is not solely rooted in the materiality of things, but also in lived traditions, stories, and identities that are transmitted across generations.

For heritage professionals, the example of the Pattada Mancha strongly advocates for a paradigm shift away from traditional, object-cantered modes of curation. Moving toward narrative, participatory, and inclusive frameworks ensures that ceremonial furniture retains its capacity to “speak” to diverse publics not just about historical customs, but also about the dynamic evolution of identities and values in contemporary society. This methodology affirms the vital importance of interpretation and community involvement, enabling the Pattada Mancha and similar artifacts to remain meaningful, dynamic components of cultural heritage discourse.

Such an approach also addresses key challenges in heritage management, particularly the risk of reducing culturally significant objects to static museum pieces devoid of their original context and significance. By embedding the multidimensional narratives of community members, ongoing rituals, and shifts in symbolic meaning, heritage professionals safeguard not only the physical manifestation of the Pattada Mancha but also the intangible threads that connect past, present, and future traditions. The continued vitality and relevance of ceremonial furniture thus hinge on embracing interpretive practices that champion inclusivity, storytelling, and active participation within the broader heritage landscape.

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A Boat Called 'WAWHFL': Interpreting Canal Heritage Through Community Boatbuilding

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Abstract
Urban waterways have long served as catalysts for regeneration, where heritage interpretation plays a pivotal role in shaping post-industrial landscapes and identities. This paper explores how heritage practices along Glasgow's Forth and Clyde Canal (FCC) engage with the transient experiences of young LGBTI+ communities to foster belonging, access, and ownership. These groups often face precarity, marginalisation, and limited spatial agency, complicating their participation in heritage narratives. Through the case study of boating and water-based activities, the research investigates how heritage interpretation - through skills transmission, storytelling, and embodied practice - can create inclusive social spaces. Boats become vessels not only of movement but of memory and meaning-making, revealing tensions around agency, participation, and the right to place. By foregrounding heritage interpretation as both process and practice, the paper highlights the transformative potential of urban waterways to support plural identities, while critically addressing who gets to engage, narrate, and belong within evolving urban heritage landscapes.

Introduction

Historic inland waterways have been a platform where cities around the world have based their urban regeneration processes and place- making (Vallerani and Vinsentin, 2018). Despite their re-imagined uses as mostly leisure and residential spaces, waterways planning, usually based on hierarchical attitudes towards heritage interpretation and engagement, miss opportunities for wider community engagement with the historic environment in identity formation processes (Jones, 2017).

We argue that urban inland waterways of significant historic importance, such as the post-industrial heritage landscape of the Forth and Clyde canal (hereafter the FCC) in Glasgow, are fluid and ever-developing environments (Ingold, 2012; Neimanis, 2012). In these

environments, the interactions between human and non-human elements reveal the heritage practice as a process rather than an end entity (Bennet, 2010; Harvey, 2012).

Our case study focuses on a group of LGBT+ young adults who, over two weeks, came together to build, decorate, and launch a wooden skiff named WAWHFL, along with two handmade oars. We argue this process transformed a post-industrial canal space, a boathouse, into what we call an activated livescape (Koumpouzi et al, 2022). The boat-building workshop they created in the boathouse became a site of negotiation, tension, and ultimately, storytelling. Through the process, participants collectively explored what it meant to occupy and reinterpret heritage on their own terms. We are asking in what way heritage practice, through boating activities, can empower communities who don't usually engage with heritage to interpret their own stories?

The FFC, alongside the River Clyde formed the backbone of the city's industrial maritime heritage, particularly in ship and boat building industries. The collapse of these industries in the later 20th c precipitated significant deprivation. Since the early 1990s, Glasgow authorities have transformed these post-industrial waterfronts through deliberate regeneration strategies. This transition can reproduce exclusionary practices by prioritizing development over community needs and erasing marginalised histories (Gray, 2018).

The case study offered a rich context for examining how historical infrastructure intersects with contemporary issues of belonging and community transformation. This canal-evolving role in urban regeneration provides a unique lens to explore the intersection of marginalized identities, spatial belonging, and the influence of authorized heritage discourse in shaping public spaces.

Transiency is central to the way we have formed the theoretical framework of the livescape, a model of activating heritage environments as agential entities rather than historical landscapes that we look at.

Theoretical Framework

We argue that the livescape is the animated landscape, in this case study a historic environment with tangible and intangible heritage significance for the communities who live near it. The livescape engages with the concept of heritage as a process which transcends hegemonic approaches that frame blue heritage spaces, as a complete entity (Haeffner, M. et al., 2017). Instead, we considered these waterscapes as ever-changing and evolving places, characterized by continuous material and cultural transformation. The fluidity of the watery places and the processual notion of waterways such as canals, generate tensions and ongoing negotiations over publicness (Varna, and Tiesdell, 2010).

The concept of the livescape builds on Lefebvre's lived space (1996); the understanding of how social practices produce transient spaces. It also incorporates Bennett's new materialist ontology (2010), which attributes agential capacity to non-human elements that activate a landscape, and Neimani's (2012) feminist critique and method of thinking with rather than of water. We also draw upon Jameson's theorization of community heritage (2016), particularly his emphasis on participatory interpretation and Silberman's work on spatial justice (2012), particularly his theorization of reclaiming rights to urban environments. Together, these theoretical threads create the livescape as an activated landscape that conceptualizes heritage as fluid, ever evolving and contested.

Young LGBTI+ communities face multiple barriers to heritage participation as they experience impermanent connection to place in both social and geographic dimensions (Ceatha et al, 2021). The Scottish Government documented their disproportionate housing insecurity (2013); the group is usually excluded from the heritage practices and processes. This exclusion is complicated by conceptual difficulties in defining 'local community' when applied to identity-based groups whose connections transcend traditional spatial boundaries (Traill, 2021; Wolowic et al, 2018). Consequently, these barriers to access manifest in limited participation (Smith, 2014; Moolhuijsen, 2020; Blamire et al., 2024). These intersecting challenges frame our investigation into how boatbuilding might create ways for heritage engagement, and consequently, a sense of belonging.

In the activated livescape, heritage interpretation and engagement are linked with a creation of an inclusive alternative heritage practice. Familiarity with the heritage waterways, local knowledge and direct participation in decision making, all contribute to the development of an inclusive interpretation of historic narratives (Môrafon et al, 2020).

Methodology

The research is based on a designed case study (Sørensen and Carman, 2009) that integrates participatory action research (PAR) with embodied heritage practices (Cornish et al., 2023), engaging LGBTI+ participants in heritage participation (Wagaman, 2015; Wagaman and Sanchez, 2017)

Data collection employed informal discussions, participant observation, field observations, all documented through video and photography. These visual methods capture the technical aspects of boat-building, affective dimensions and social interactions.

The participatory dimension is crucial, as it positions participants not as subjects of research but as co-researchers and knowledge producers (Parker and Jenkins, 2016). We

acknowledge researcher positionality within these spaces (England, 1994), recognizing that the documentation is never neutral but filtered through our own embodied experiences.

The young adults' group was recruited from Kirkintilloch, a town outside Glasgow with historic connections to boat-building on the FCC. The 2-week boat-building workshop took place in the Seagull Trust boathouse, on the site of a historic boatyards, and deliberately positioned participants within a space of heritage significance.

The process was guided by a master boat-builder whose expertise helped to enable participants' agency in the construction. Despite minimal initial woodworking experience, all ultimately engaged in the physically demanding process. The intensive schedule required commitment with full day working five days in the week. Each day, the group had lunch on the pontoon, next to the canal and breaks in the boathouse's mess room, which provided a platform for casual interactions amongst the young adults, other canal users and visitors.

We wanted to capture how participants navigate the intersection of traditional practices and contemporary identities, examining moments of tension, learning and creating. There is potential to democratize heritage processes while creating space for marginalized communities to claim positions as legitimate knowledge holders (Berg, 2004). This approach questions whose heritage is deemed for preservation and how participatory methods might expand these boundaries.

Results

Boat-building and boating are understood as heritage practices (Wetherell et al., 2018); modes through which stories, skills, and relationships with place are created and transmitted. Through this lens, the activated heritage of the canal revealed a livescape; a dynamic space shaped by the actions of those engaging with it. Traditional boat-building became a means of preserving and transmitting knowledge of waterways between generations, fostering familiarity with a historically significant but often overlooked environment.

> "These oars are very skilfully made. Well done" (Member1, Seagull Trust, supervising the work).

The young people engaged in these practices to co-create stories, generating a sense of ownership over a space that may not have traditionally included them.

> "I never noticed the canal before. It was just there, water, where we chucked rubbish in on the way home from school" (Participant 1).

These waterways also revealed the transient nature of social engagement - communities forming for the workshop and dissolving after the end of the project - surfacing tensions around ownership, inclusion, and authority, on who gets to interpret canal heritage and whose knowledge counts.

> “We are the ones that know the canal well and we safeguard that it remains open. Sometimes people with authority have no clue of the practical issues that could cause damage” (Fieldnotes, Forth and Clyde Canal Society Member).

Intergenerational transmission of intangible cultural heritage was established between boating community members and young participants, who actively reinterpreted traditional knowledge through their distinct positionalities. We witnessed challenges to hierarchical heritage narratives, revealing how activated heritage landscapes can democratize both participation in heritage activities and decisions regarding legitimate interpretation. A pivotal moment in the workshop occurred during the decoration phase, when participants transformed the boat into a canvas for creative expression, incorporating handprints and unconventional colours as markers of collective ownership. This provoked resistance from an established boater.

> “This is not a boat. Boats do not look like that” (Member 2, Seagull Trust).

This conflict manifested tensions between traditional heritage interpretations and participants’ desire to assert ownership through personalization. Historic waterways function as transformative environments. Water challenges fixed ideas of place and invites exploration. Boathouses become livescapes; workshops where community is not inherited but made. There are clear implications here for heritage practice. Ultimately, boats and boating are more than heritage artefacts, they are tools for social inclusion, offering movement across physical and social barriers, and enabling visibility of underrepresented stories.

> “Before I used to stay in my room and not really leave the house. The boat, coming to the workshop everyday, made me want to leave my room” (Participant 1).

In spaces defined by transience, such as the regenerated waterways, we find heritage not as static, but as a livescape in flux.

> “None of us ever really noticed the canal before. It was just there. Sometimes we saw boats coming through. But we didn’t know why, how and where they were going to” (Participant 4).

We observed a process of knowledge acquisition and transmission. A direct relationship emerged between knowledge acquisition and participants' developing sense of ownership; as skills increased through hands-on engagement with traditional boat-building practices, attitudes toward waterways heritage shifted. Participants increasingly articulated their agency as knowledge-holders and heritage interpreters.

Our findings challenge conventional understandings of place familiarity, suggesting more nuanced theoretical frameworks for heritage place-making that move beyond locality and community engagement assumptions. The boat-building process prompted identity formation, with participants creating shared narratives incorporating both traditional heritage elements and contemporary LGBTI+ identities

> "Boat building and then trying our boat on the water meant that we established who we are. We collectively created something and it's on the canal" (Participant 3).

The communal lunches on a pontoon adjacent to the canal became essential for social connection. These informal gatherings facilitated idea exchanges and deliberations about the ongoing work. The significance of these cannot be overstated; they provided essential opportunities for participants to collectively process and interpret their embodied heritage engagement.

> "This is such a nice spot. I never noticed the canal before. Now I notice that it is full of garbage" (Participant 3, during lunch on the pontoon outside the Boathouse)

In fact, when the participants were asked to come up with a name for their boat, they chose WAWHFL - What Are We Having For Lunch.

The culmination of the building process, testing the boat in the boathouse basin, represented a moment of technical validation and emotional release, with participants cheering their creation successfully floated. This test launch was followed by a more public showcase at the local canal festival, extending the participants' engagement beyond the workshop into community celebration. The project extended into formal heritage spaces through a participant-curated exhibition at the local heritage centre, with the installation of the boat within the gallery. This institutional presence represents a significant recontextualization of both the participants' work and the heritage itself.

The participants' presentations at the celebratory event reflected multiple dimensions of their experience, including the technical achievement of building and navigating a boat, the social significance of occupying previously unfamiliar spaces, the intergenerational connections formed with Seagull Trust, and their newly developed relationship with the waterway. These

reflections demonstrate how embodied heritage engagement can facilitate not only technical skill development but profound reconsiderations of place and belonging.

Conclusions and Reflections

WAWFHL boat demonstrates how boat-building functions as a vehicle for meaningful heritage engagement rather than the heritagisation (Sjöholm, 2016) of communities where marginalized groups become objects of heritage discourse rather than active participants (Davis, 2007). The participatory interpretation embodied in WAWFHL confronts hierarchical heritage narratives, as the boatbuilders affirmed their role as interpreters of their own heritage through the aesthetic interventions on the boat.

The canal environment functioned as a space where conventional social hierarchies may be suspended temporarily, creating opportunities for novel forms of belonging. This spatial liminality proved significant for the LGBTI+ young adults navigating often-exclusionary heritage landscapes and challenging their own personal circumstances.

Heritage practices can foster belonging among transient communities by challenging conceptions of heritage as fixed in place and time. The formation of workshop environments through livescapes can transform relationships with urban places. The embodied experience of building and rowing changed participants' spatial relationship with the canal, from an everyday place to a meaningful place.

Positioning this project within the Heritage Crafts Association's designation of boat-building as an endangered heritage practice highlights the potential for marginalized communities to contribute to heritage sustainability through professional development and education. WAWFHL boat represents not merely a learning exercise but a meaningful contribution to keeping endangered knowledge systems alive whilst demonstrating how inclusion can serve conservation.

This study has been used as a model of engagement for local community groups by the East Dunbartonshire Council as part of their regeneration plan, the case study could work as an advocate for a formal scheme for education in heritage interpretation.

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Bulevar Papagaio: Identity, Controversy and Heritage Interpretation

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Abstract

This paper presents an interpretive experience carried out in A Coruña (Galicia-Spain) in March-April 2023. The project took the form of a guided walking tour, designed to precede and accompany the premiere of a theatre play in the city (Bulevar Papagaio). Its purpose was to contextualise the urban space that has inspired the play but which has since disappeared, surviving only in collective memory. The tour was conceived according to the principles of heritage interpretation and interpretive planning. Heritage interpretation proved to be an ideal means of conveying the significance of this absent space in a deeper, more revealing, and thought-provoking manner. Thus, the guided experience was intended not merely as an act of entertainment or nostalgic evocation, but as an opportunity for reflection and heightened awareness. The TEHIC (Towards a European Heritage Interpretation Curriculum) project pursues the development of a standardized training curriculum, the professional recognition of heritage interpreters, the sharing of good practices, and the creation of a higher-education MOOC in heritage interpretation. In this context, the paper on the Bulevar Papapagaio project could serve as a valuable case study to examine how the criteria for good practices proposed by TEHIC can be applied in practice.

Introduction

In March 2023, the theatre company A Feroz, based in Santiago de Compostela, launched a cultural intervention in A Coruña that combined a guided tour with a theatrical performance. The project took as its central subject the dismantled district of O Papagaio, a neighbourhood historically associated with prostitution and later erased through urban redevelopment and real estate speculation. The initiative drew inspiration from poems and photographs created by local authors that documented O Papagaio's last days before demolition. By merging a site-specific guided visit with a stage production, the project sought to activate memory, confront themes of ugliness and exploitation, and encourage audiences to reflect on the social and cultural significance of the place. In doing so, A Feroz directly

addressed the challenges of engaging with what has been termed “difficult heritage”: the contested memories and painful histories that are often marginalised in mainstream narratives (Logan and Reeves, 2009).

This introduction frames the project not as a conventional artistic spectacle but as a deeply engaged act of cultural mediation. It asked audiences to revisit O Papagaio’s history, to connect with the lives of its former inhabitants, and to consider the impact of gentrification and urban transformation on identity and memory.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

To understand a project of this nature, it is essential to situate it within a theoretical framework that recognises the complexity of heritage. Heritage cannot be reduced to a fixed collection of material objects. Instead, it must be seen as a dynamic social construction, always contested and imbued with symbolic and political meanings (Smith, 2006). Cultural heritage encompasses both tangible and intangible elements, operating as a field of memory and representation. Its significance depends on the uses society assigns to it.

Cultural tourism, when responsibly managed, can democratise access to heritage. However, if reduced to superficial consumption, it risks trivialising memory. Prats (1997) argues that meaningful cultural tourism should promote critical appropriation, generating significant connections between communities and territories.

This perspective is particularly relevant when dealing with “difficult heritage”: spaces linked to war, dictatorship, migration, injustice, or social marginalisation (Logan and Reeves, 2009). Engaging with such sites requires sensitivity, inclusivity, and a willingness to integrate multiple perspectives. Importantly, it demands that practitioners resist simplification and polarisation.

In this process, heritage interpretation becomes a crucial tool. Tilden (1957) defined interpretation not as the mere transmission of information but as a communicative process aimed at provoking personal connections with meaning. Smith (2012) later stressed the political and performative nature of interpretation, underlining how it enables societies to resignify the past in light of the present.

A major European reference point is the TEHIC project (Towards a European Heritage Interpretation Curriculum). TEHIC was the first initiative to establish a standardised curriculum for heritage interpretation at university level across Europe. It offered training through a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) and produced a Handbook of Best Practices, which documented successful experiences across different contexts (TEHIC

Consortium, 2024). The project represented a step forward in recognising interpretation as a profession and a discipline, joining academic and practical perspectives.

Theatre, when applied within this interpretive framework, does more than communicate narratives; it activates heritage, re-signifies it collectively, and provokes critical reflection. As González and Fraguas (2021) point out, theatre can become a transformative space where audiences are invited to reconsider memory and identity. The case of Bulevar Papagaio exemplifies how performance and guided interpretation can converge to foster social dialogue about contested pasts.

Methodology

The methodology applied to the Bulevar Papagaio project was qualitative, exploratory, and participatory, oriented towards the activation of local heritage through theatre and guided interpretation. The first stage involved a bibliographic review with two strands: (1) a historical and cultural study of O Papagaio, and (2) an analysis of literary and testimonial sources, particularly the writings and photographs of Maribel Longueira and Luisa Villalta, which had documented the neighbourhood's final days. This stage allowed for contextualisation and the identification of narrative gaps that artistic practice could fill. The second stage was archival research, which involved consulting local and digital archives to collect primary sources, including historical documents, photographs, and press articles. These materials contributed to giving authenticity and depth to the narrative. The third stage involved fieldwork with the community. In-depth interviews were conducted with shopkeepers, residents, journalists, and others connected to the quarter. These conversations recovered living memories, intergenerational perspectives, and voices often absent from official histories.

In the framework of the final conference of the TEHIC project (May 2025) at the University of Gothenburg, under the theme 'Training and Professionalisation in Heritage Interpretation: Challenges and Future Directions', this contribution may be situated within the community-based approach, offering a relevant case through which to reflect on the project's proposed criteria of good practice. The methodological framework explicitly followed the principles set out by TEHIC: interdisciplinarity, inclusion of the community, respect for living memory, and the use of heritage interpretation. The design and interpretive planning of the visit followed the TORE model: Thematic, Organised, Relevant and Enjoyable. These align with the Handbook of Best Practices (TEHIC Consortium, 2024), which recommends projects that are sustainable, participatory, value-based, inclusive, and rigorously documented.

Through this methodology, the project did not merely represent heritage. It activated it, problematised it, and transformed it into a shared cultural experience that combined knowledge, emotion, and reflection.

Results and Main Discussion

The Neighbourhood of O Papagaio

The project unfolded in A Coruña, focusing on O Papagaio, one of the city's most emblematic and controversial neighbourhoods. Historically, O Papagaio was associated with prostitution and popularly referred to as the barrio chino. In the 1990s, the local press labelled it "the rotten heart of A Coruña". Later, real estate developers sought to transform the degraded district into a luxury residential and commercial complex.

This redevelopment was controversial from the outset. Residents faced structural damage to their homes due to excavations for underground car parks. Concerns arose about traffic congestion, the loss of affordable housing, and the erasure of local identity. The process resulted in gentrification and the displacement of long-standing inhabitants. Protests erupted, yet municipal authorities prioritised redevelopment. O Papagaio thus became a symbol of urban speculation and contested memory.

Local authors, including writer Maribel Longueira and poet Luisa Villalta, documented this transition in their book O Papagaio, which served as a key source for the theatre project.

Art, Memory, and Territory

A Feroz defines itself as a collective committed to truth, authenticity, and social engagement. "Our company is rooted in a love for truth, honest projects, and expressing our experiences authentically. We blend various arts, disciplines, sciences, and perspectives. Our mission is to transcend personal barriers and collaborate in bringing questions and potential answers to the stage" (A Feroz, 2024).

The Bulevar Papagaio project exemplified this ethos. By combining theatre with a guided tour, the company sought not merely to represent the past but to bring audiences into direct contact with the places and stories that had shaped it. The guided tour was central: it contextualised the play, linked it to physical and social realities, and fostered dialogue with the community.

Figure 1. Guiding in O Papagaio. Image by Alberto Suárez.

Community Voices and Participation

Central to the project was the involvement of the local community. Interviews with traders, journalists, and residents provided authenticity and grounded the narrative in lived experience. This collaboration highlighted how O Papagaio had been experienced differently across generations and social groups.

Particular emphasis was placed on women's experiences. O Papagaio was a feminised space, shaped by the presence of sex workers, nuns, shopkeepers, teachers, activists, writers, and even a well-known actress. The project highlighted their roles, often invisible in official accounts, and connected them to broader issues of gender and social justice. The central street's name, Panaderas (Women Bakers), itself evokes this gendered dimension.

Interpretative Techniques

The guided tour incorporated creative interpretative techniques inspired by heritage interpretation methodology. Russian nesting dolls (matryoshkas) were used as metaphors for layers of history: stories contained within stories. As the dolls were physically opened and passed among participants, audiences grasped the metaphor of interwoven narratives.

Other participatory devices included reading aloud historical texts and testimonies, engaging the audience directly in narration. Photographs of O Papagaio before its demolition were shown, underscoring the absence of physical traces and the importance of memory. At the tour's conclusion, the names of forgotten women who had lived and worked in the neighbourhood were read aloud by participants. This act of remembrance personalised history, transforming anonymous figures into individuals with dignity.

The interpretative theme guiding the tour was: *The urban and human evolution of this part of the city encourages reflection on contrasts, memory, and the need to look at the past in order to act in the future.* From this theme emerged contrasts such as pleasure and joy

versus misery and desperation; abandonment versus speculation; and memory versus erasure. The guided tour and the play together embodied this theme.

Figure 2: TEHIC Best Practices Criteria accomplished in the project. Source: Author.

The Theatrical Performance

The play itself served as the culmination of the project. It denounced exploitation and speculation, giving dramatic form to the injustices experienced in O Papagaio. By linking performance with guided interpretation, A Feroz created a holistic experience that combined knowledge, memory, and critical reflection.

Figure 3. Boulevard Papagaio performance. Image by Alberto Suárez

One limitation acknowledged was the absence of a formal evaluation process. While audience feedback was gathered informally through observation and conversation,

structured evaluation was lacking. Later projects developed with A Feroz incorporate this component.

Conclusions and Reflections

The O Papagaio project represents a powerful example of heritage interpretation linked to theatre. By uniting a guided tour with a play, A Feroz created an intervention that was simultaneously artistic, social, and critical. Grounded in Smith's (2006) conception of heritage as a living, contested construct, the project reactivated a neighbourhood stigmatised, silenced, and transformed by urban speculation. It addressed a case of "difficult heritage" with sensitivity and inclusivity, recovering voices often marginalised, particularly those of women.

Methodologically, it aligned with TEHIC principles, following the guidelines of the Handbook of Best Practices (TEHIC Consortium, 2024). It prioritised interdisciplinarity, community participation, respect for living memory, and value-based interpretation. By doing so, it not only represented heritage but activated it and projected it into the future.

The project shows how theatre can embody symbolic resistance, repair memory, and create new ways of inhabiting shared spaces. It confirms that heritage interpretation, when combined with art, is an effective tool for addressing controversial issues of memory, identity, and injustice. Bulevar Papagaio demonstrates that every territory contains stories worth telling, and that art, when rooted in research, community, and ethics, can narrate them truthfully and critically.

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From Idiot to Citizen: Interpreting Society's View on Human Worth through the Built Environment

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Abstract

Using one of the first special-needs-schools in Sweden from 1959, this project explores the interrelation between architecture, pedagogy, and societal attitudes toward children with intellectual disabilities throughout the 20th century. The study examines how architecture and pedagogy have been portrayed and left both tangible and intangible traces. Spanning from Idiot schools for feebleminded children in the early 20th century, through post-war Special schools, to today's Adapted primary schools for children with intellectual disabilities. The former students represent a societal group who themselves have had difficulties emphasizing the importance of the cultural environments tied to their history. By using a heritage interpretation approach – in addition to traditional documentation of physical traces – this project has successfully been able to highlight questions concerning communication, valuation, relations and experiences from this marginalized group of students, as being of obvious relevance in the interpretation of the cultural heritage and shaping local community identity.

Introduction

Why research this topic? The world of schooling is well documented, but when it comes to students with intellectual disabilities there is a surprisingly lack of historical knowledge – whether it concerns pioneering educators, historically significant school buildings, or former students' recollections. Starting in the hypothesis that the cultural environment of a given era reflects its prevailing values, the study uses the Bingeby Special School in Visby, established in 1959, to illuminate how attitudes towards children with intellectual disabilities evolved during the last century, and how these shifts were manifested in the design of school environments.

The study addresses two fundamental questions inherent in the communication of knowledge concerning our tangible cultural heritage: which narratives are prioritized, and

which are omitted? Furthermore, in what ways have these choices affected our understanding of past society? Doing so, by using methods to include and draw attention to a marginalized group who actually seemed in Bingeby special school.

Figure 1. Bingeby annual schoolbook 1969. Bingeby annual schoolbook, Hans Hemlin studio.

Method

The study uses a Comparative Didactic Analysis Model, for structuring and analysing descriptions through comparison, with the purpose of facilitating and promoting reflection on the content. It has been applied both during the analytical work itself and in seminars and lectures. To analyse, identify, and pedagogically make visible different historical periods in relation to the coherence of national ideologies, legislation, and policy documents, as well as their concrete outcomes within the small municipal Gotland, regarding the educational opportunities for children with intellectual disabilities, the choice of pedagogical approaches, and the impact these had on the design of schools.

A co-working study on local history and identity

The research process itself constitutes a value, as it has brought together different fields of knowledge, perspectives, contexts, and experiences from its participants of teachers, students, architects and others. At times, the absence of a certain information has also constituted valuable knowledge. Similarly, unanswered questions have not been regarded as a failure.

On the contrary, they have given valuable opportunities for further interpretations and, at the same time, stimulated a greater willingness from participants to continue contributing to the work, motivated upon a shared recognition of a lack of historical awareness, concerning this specific subject. Certain generalizations and selections have been made deliberately in the research, to highlight the major changes in the overarching interrelations between architecture, pedagogy and societal attitudes throughout the 20th century. In the following text, described as five epochs, each named according to the prevailing view of the children with intellectual disabilities.

Figure 2. Five epochs of pedagogy, 1900–2000. Image sources: 1900 – Thomas Olsson's archive; 1920–1940 – Sture Ryman; 1950–1960 and 1970–1980 – Special School Archive, Gotland; 1990–2000 – Lisa Östman.

Results

The Children of Charity (1900–1910)

The following quotation is taken from Sweden's first teachers' manual for children with intellectual disabilities. Its author, Thorborg Rappe, was among the pioneering women in the care of the feebleminded, often grounded in a strongly religious and philanthropic tradition:

> "The essence of the idiot is that he stands alone and is not integrated into the greater human society. To lead him out of this condition, to give him awareness of himself, of God, is the aim of education" (Rappe 1903).

Municipalities had no responsibility to educate pupils unable to follow the regular elementary school curriculum. Schools were financed largely through charity, in line with the prevailing ideology of the time "to transform useless and burdensome children into productive and sustaining individuals, both for the sake of their own independence and to reduce the costs to society" (Kungl. Maj:t, 1871).

Such was also the case in Visby, where the Ladies' Society founded a work school for Unfortunate and defenceless girls. Here, as in many other towns, it was socially prominent individuals who supported these small work schools, often by making available buildings located in the more distinguished quarters of the city. In Visby, the work school for female pupils was housed in a well-maintained medieval building situated next to the cathedral. However, with poorer facilities indoors.

Dehumanized (1920–1940)

During the interwar period, society's view of children with intellectual disabilities underwent a significant shift. They came to be regarded as a social problem and an obstacle to welfare, at a time when the national economy was in crisis and population growth was weak. The ideological priorities changed: from the question of how to protect the feebleminded from society, to how to protect society from the feebleminded (Grünwald 2008).

The former medical director Karl Grünewald describes how earlier confidence in children's capacity to develop through improved social and economic conditions was undermined by new biological knowledge of human heredity. This development led to legislation on sterilization, marriage prohibition, and institutional confinement—measures referred to as racial or genetic hygiene. "This also influenced public attitudes, shifting from pity and compassion to fear and rejection" (ibid. s.83).

Parents' efforts to raise their disabled children themselves were characterized as misguided maternal love. In the 1940s, legislation was passed mandating the compulsory institutionalization of such children for care and education, often at great distances from their homes.

From Gotland, children were sent to Ekhagen School Home, an institution on the mainland from where children rarely could leave for visiting home. In addition to classrooms, it contained dormitories and a gymnasium. Education was provided in the mornings, while the remainder of the day was devoted to practical tasks. Older students often remained at the school home for many years as working students, serving as unpaid assistants in the kitchen, laundry, with woodcutting etc. (Eklöf1990; Larsson 2013).

The Newcomers (1950–1960)

The postwar period was a time of profound change, both ideologically and in terms of societal planning. Sweden benefited from having remained outside the war, and the economy was strong, shaping the construction of the Swedish welfare state.

One symbolic shift was when responsibility for the education of children with intellectual disabilities shifted from the National Board of Health to the National Board of Education. From being regarded as medically ill, to considered educable.

In 1954, the long-delayed implementation of the Law on the Education and Care of Educable Feebleminded Children (Kungl. Maj:t 1944), mandating compulsory education, was finally enforced. Educable children were those deemed capable of learning to read, write, and count. First 1967, children earlier labelled uneducable also was included in compulsory education (Socialdepartementet1967).

On Gotland, the explicit legal requirement of compulsory schooling, initiated a plan of expanding a small, rural school outside Visby. But the decisive factor for building a completely new facility —Bingeby Special School in Visby—was not dependent on pedagogical considerations but rather building-technical reasons. It was deemed more rational to coordinate water, sewage, and heating by locating the school next to an existing psychiatric hospital and an infectious disease hospital.

The education at Bingeby Special School was guided by The National Board of Education's first curriculum, The Provisional Curriculum for Schools for the Feebleminded. In which describes the goal of schooling as "to develop pupils into harmonious, capable, and responsible human beings and members of society" (Skolöverstyrelsen 1946).

The curriculum emphasised on social adjustment, practical subjects, and the capacity for independent living. The latter addressed through lessons in Activity for Daily Life (ADL), which also led to arranging a training apartment within the school.

In contrast to earlier monumental schools homes, Bingeby schools design reflects an ambition of creating a small-scale, child friendly school environment. In addition to the main school building, with classrooms of varying sizes for both theoretical and practical lessons, there was also a children's home for preschoolers, a gymnasium, staff housing, and a boiler house with laundry facilities.

It was a time of evolving and adaptation within a local community that initially remained hesitant, where the name Bingeby for many became synonymous with the expression "Bingeby lunatics", something unknown and frightening in a society where many never had encountered a child with disabilities (Larsson 1989). Yet, over time, the school gradually became more integrated into the local community.

Included (1970–1980)

In many respects, this was the most egalitarian period in Sweden during the twentieth century, also in terms of planning schools, regardless of the pupil's intellectual capacity. This

era represents the most expansive phase of the Swedish welfare state, enabled by economic growth and high taxation, which generated the resources for an expanding public sector.

Two ideological principles gained particular significance following the closure of the large institutional facilities. The first was the *Normalization Principle* (Nirje, 1969), which held that societal interventions should enable individuals, regardless of ability, to live as normal a life as possible. The second was the *Small Group Principle* (Grünewald, 1971), which emphasized that groups should be small enough for individuals to know and anticipate one another's reactions.

Part of the National Board of Education worked specifically on issues concerning facilities and special education for pupils in special schools. Their work resulted in highly detailed curricula specifying pedagogical goals (Skolöverstyrelsen 1973-1978), as well as comprehensive guidelines on how school buildings should be designed to support those goals.

In Gotland, the reforms led to integration of pupils from Bingeby Special School into other existing schools. The adaptations, however, did not always fully comply with the Board's directive that "the relationship between the special school and the rest of the school must reflect the fact that the different pupil groups belong to the school on equal terms" (Skolöverstyrelsen 1977, s. 5). One class was placed in the basement in an existing school from the nineteenth century, without significant adjustments, while a more comprehensive renovation of facilities and playground was carried out when pupils with multiple disabilities were relocated to a school from the 1960s. One of the responsible teachers recalled:

> "There we had the rooms needed, even though it initially wasn´t easy to get it approved. Room for water play, a sand room, rooms for individual instruction, and a larger room for different activities"

Competitors (1990–2000)

Sweden in the 1990s was a period characterized by deregulation and decentralization. The school system was municipalized, and the former National Board of Education, which had previously exercised detailed control, oversight, and expertise concerning the needs of special schools, was dissolved, leaving behind a vacuum. The head of special schools, describes:

> "The work of explaining, defending, and justifying the allocation of resources for pupils in special schools became extremely difficult, in the absence of the expertise formerly held

by the National Board of Education, when the activities had to compete for resources with other municipal services".

In 1998, the last major project for special schools on Gotland was undertaken, an extension to an existing upper secondary school. The planning process was marked by high ambitions in terms of climate and sustainability; however, no detailed regulation to guide the adaptation for special school use was available. Except for two so-called sensory rooms for neuropsychiatric multiple disabled children, with design influenced by Snoezelen pedagogy (Mertens 2008), standard classrooms were constructed, which later required retrofitting in terms of furnishing and functionality.

Conclusions and Reflections

Surprisingly little is documented in official school authority records and archives about Bingeby Special School. Although the school's original buildings from 1959 remain, they represent an unknown cultural heritage to the local society. The school's name has been changed, new buildings have been added, and the school environment is today integrated into a complex urban setting of historical layers.

These conditions can be understood both as a limitation and as a resource. The initial absence of historical knowledge in this project helped evolve an interest among those involved—teachers, students, architects, and others—to engage, contribute and reflect on different interpretations of what constitutes cultural and historical value, what should be preserved, and why.

Methods of heritage interpretation used in this project have been crucial when it comes to engaging, to involve participants and cooperating in the process of enhancing the awareness of sometimes questioned ethical aspects and extracting theoretical knowledge from shared individual experiences.

At Uppsala University's Building Conservation Program at Campus Gotland, traditional building conservation and documentation is prioritized. Hopefully this project can enhance awareness of the important skills of Heritage Interpretation when it comes to making intangible cultural heritage more visible through the traces left in the built environment and therefore include it as part of the existing program.

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Interpreting Librarianship as Heritage: Digital Preservation of Everyday Histories and Tools of the Trade

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Abstract

Tech innovations have influenced a shift in the landscape of cultural institutions. Libraries often house more than two dimensional collections; the buildings themselves are often listed as heritage. Their everyday life also generates heritage in the form of stories, practices, and tools of the trade – now at risk of obsolescence The focus of this research is the Librarianship Voices and Tools Project (LVTBCU), conducted at Lucian Blaga Academic Library in Cluj-Napoca, Romania. It aims to position librarianship as heritage, interpreting it through the use of digital tools. The heritage interpretation approach relies on combining immersive experiences with storytelling, with three goals: supporting the librarian's voice and professional self-reflection, providing access to heritage spaces and tools of the librarian's trade, and to immaterial heritage via the digitalised material. In doing so, it empowers librarians to situate themselves within the wider ecosystem of digital scholarship and the digital humanities.

Introduction

Libraries, archives and museums play a pivotal role in gathering and preserving the culture and history of the society, and what some scholars name "memory institutions" (Tanner, 2019). But alongside collecting and preserving the memories of others they also have a memory of their own. The role of the librarian has significantly transformed in recent decades. This evolution reflects broader changes in the information and culture landscape, including the rise of digital technologies (Poulopoulos, V., 2022), open access movements, and data-driven research practices (Corrall, 2014). The tools of the trade are changing fast and so is the libraries' physical space – and this observation prompted the research.

LVBCU project aims to capture and preserve the everyday stories of librarians at the BCU Library. Overall, the aim of this project is to help the present-day user engage with the library's multiple layers of heritage, from the building itself, the tangible heritage, to its immaterial heritage – such as practices, narratives and the evolving practitioner roles. As Carman notes "[…] heritage is inevitably more intangible a phenomenon than tangible, and yet that its intangibility needs to attach to something tangible in order to exist at all." (Carman, 2009).

The research team's challenge was to develop a solution to communicate all these aspects. Digital space was identified as an ideal common ground. If designed correctly it can be modular and adaptable; it provides interpretation and communication variety for both material and immaterial heritage and it constitutes a form of preservation. As Lara Corona notes, "[…] the digital space provides access to items placed in storage for preservation purposes [when] collections are so extensive that the premises are overcrowded and hazardous [so,] due to these factors, a substantial portion of collections is unseen […] and destined to be obscure." (Corona, 2023).

Methodology

In 2024, the authors of this research initiated the LVTBCU project to improve the access not only to collected artefacts and their oral histories, but to the building itself. LVYBCU is intended to be a digital double of the "Lucian Blaga" Central University Library, making previously inaccessible spaces accessible to the public and directly connected to the librarians' rich histories. It includes building a digital repository of artifacts, functioning as a knowledge network that allows users to deeply explore its layers of meaning.

Our method centres on collecting immaterial data, primarily through oral archives and interviews. These "lived" histories capture the intentions, motivations, attitudes, and experiences of the librarians. The means to this was to create a digital double, a digital repository and a knowledge network to connect them, that would allow the public to experience inaccessible spaces, artefacts and librarian stories. This would strengthen the connection between public and librarian and reshape the users' perspective of the library and of the self as library-user and community member. The digital prototype was aimed at: a) 'opening up' specific practice-spaces, typically inaccessible or semi-accessible to the public (the pathology lab, professor's only rooms, the storage areas, etc.), b) present and interpret artefacts and c) enable the librarian to convey their lived experiences. In turn the account of librarians creates and binds the layers of meaning in the case of both heritage artefacts and the library's physical spaces. Beyond engendering heritage awareness, the

proposed prototype can generate awareness of the librarian role – a profession deeply transformed in the digital age, even facing obsolescence.

The proposed project aims to create a mobile application and a web page. While this paper focuses on the former, the development process is a shared one, and has three overlapping phases: data collection, building the digital repository, and interconnecting the two. After collecting interviews and processing the immaterial data (motivations, experiences etc.) the second stage opened with identifying candidates for digitalization – targeting artefacts conveying heritage meaning and which could enable storytelling.

The main criteria taken into consideration were the representative character, the accessibility/availability, the heritage meaning/value, and technical criteria (specific for digital scanning, such as surface type, material, volume etc.). These were employed for library objects and partially adapted for the selection of library spaces.

Since oral evidence is vital in the study of artifacts, we have conducted our own data collection through a questionnaire and in-person interviews with former BCU employees. The interview protocol was designed to explore the subjects' personal backgrounds and the evolution of their daily professional routines. The inquiry focused on change, specifically the librarian's role evolution in time, the associated challenges, and how these shifts influenced the tools and the library's physical space.

It was observed that many individuals were unwilling to participate or share information. Some cited negative memories of their time at the library while others offered no explanation. Conversely, those who agreed to interviews provided valuable insights, often expanding on the questions presented. As noted in existing theoretical frameworks, material artifacts frequently serve to trigger and facilitate the recall of oral information (Vansina, 1985). This was empirically demonstrated during our interviews; respondents who were interviewed on-site, in their former workplace provided accounts that were significantly more detailed compared to email respondents.

Case Study Background

Constructed between 1906-1909 the building was modelled after the University of Basel Library. Over time, the institution has collected more than 2 million volumes, along with historical artifacts and old librarian tools. Throughout its history, generations of librarians have served this institution, meticulously cataloguing its collections and guiding students but despite their contributions, remarkably little is known about the lives and professional environments of these individuals. The 2023 library's history album (Luffyk, 2023) featured a rich collection of photographs that prompted reflection on this very issue. Professor Doru

Radosav, historian and former library director, noted that the images of past librarians (fig.1) invite us to contemplate their identities: "What did these people look like? What did they do? How did they think compared to us, today's generation?" (Sîrcă, 2024).

Figure 1. First women librarians hired in the Central Library, (c. 1909). Fărcaş Tiberiu, Primele bibliotecare din Biblioteca Centrală Cluj, *Clujul Cultural*, 29 March 2022. Available at: *https://clujulcultural.ro/primele-bibliotecare-din-biblioteca-centrala-cluj/* (Accessed: 27 August 2025).

While some notable exceptions exist, the lives and professional narratives of countless librarians remain largely undocumented. For the institution's early years and the interwar period, some data exist. This includes images of the first female librarians, some of whom are named, yet information regarding their specific duties or the structure of their workday is lacking.

Results

The LVTBCU project’s first digitized space was the Catalogue Room. The traditional catalogue, contained in massive card files, stands mostly untouched today. What once represented the starting point for any scientific research is now just an object of memory, replaced by computers and the online database but beyond the object itself lies the story of its creation.

A former librarian offered a glimpse into the cataloguing process before computers were available:

> "When I arrived at the library, in August 1974...In the catalogue room […] were card catalogues and handwritten ones from before, and the multiplication of the cards had already begun. […] Initially, we wrote the catalogue cards by hand and then typed them up on a typewriter. We had these forms, or cards, on which, with a kind of template, five cards would fit: three horizontally and two vertically alongside them. These forms had a thin, waxy paper on top. We would insert them into the typewriter and type the cataloguing information, the actual catalogue card […] The head of the department, Mrs. Arama, would check, if it was correct and had no mistakes […] it would be duplicated […]. There, a machine with a kind of drum, smeared with thick ink, would print the information onto cardboard. From there, it would be transferred to the card that would eventually go into the catalogue. After being duplicated and printed on the cardboard, it would then go to be bound, where it was cut to the size of the catalogue card [and then] inserted into the catalogue with that metal rod. Oh, how difficult it was to undo it! You had to tighten it with a screw, and that thin metal would destroy our fingers. I always used gloves because it would otherwise tear up my fingers." (Interview 1)

Figures 2 and 3. Catalogue Room - (c. interwar period) and (2025). Clujul şi Clujenii, Biblioteca Universităţii (Cluj), Egyetemi Könyvtár Kolozsvár, 9 November 2024. Available at: https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=978630737614736&set=a.978631390948004 (Accessed: 27 August 2025). Biblioteca Central Universitară "Lucian Blaga" Cluj-Napoca, Despre noi – Biblioteca în imagini. Available at: https://www.bcucluj.ro/ro/despre-noi/biblioteca-%C3%AEn-imagini (Accessed: 27 August 2025).

But not only big objects have their stories; smaller ones also trigger memories from former librarians. For example, the typewriter.

> "When I started at the library, I didn't know how to type. They didn't teach us that in school, so I had to learn. At first, I typed slowly with two fingers, back when I was first starting cataloguing, Mrs. Arama said, «My dear, you have to learn, because I can hear

how slowly you're working» […] So, on my own, and with my own money, I went to a typing course and learned, more or less. But I never reached the speed of my colleagues who had ten or twenty years of experience […].” (Interview 1)

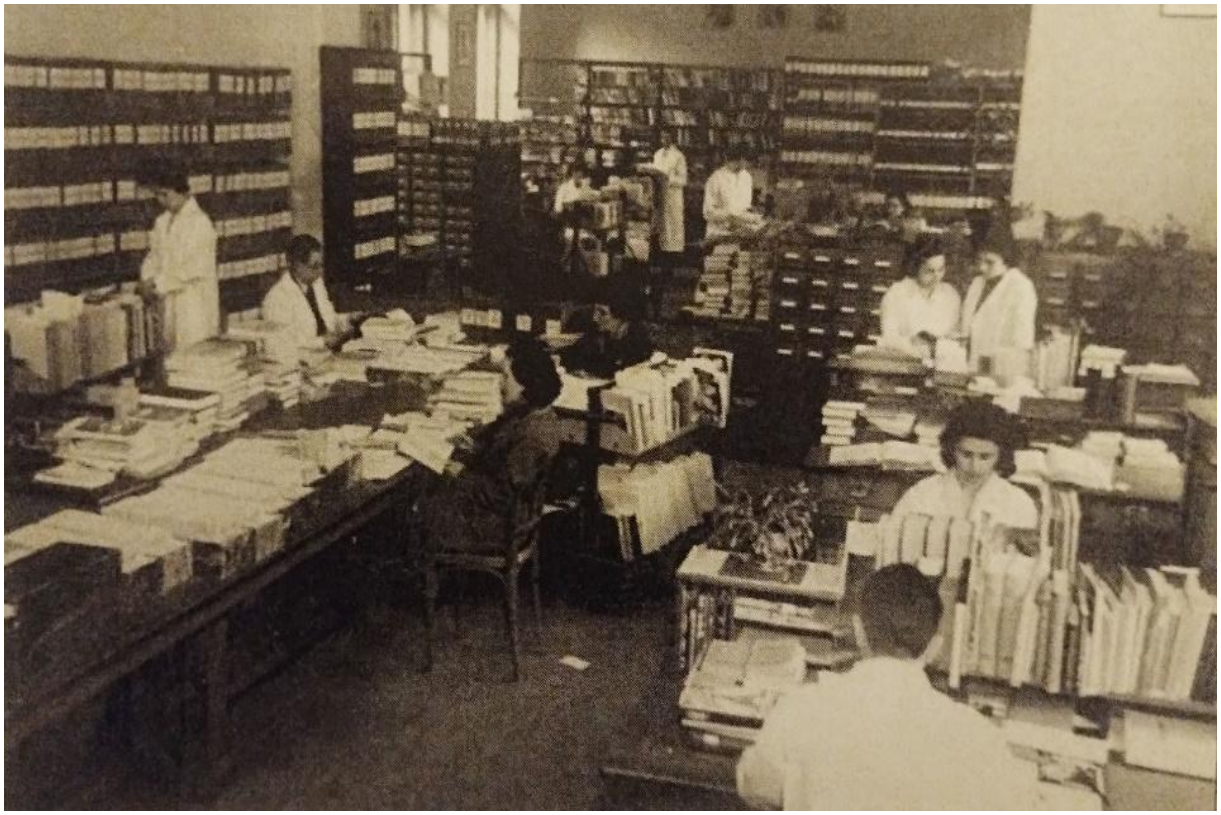

Figure 4. The Cataloguing department (c. 1970).

After a *lived histories* collection phase, followed the *digitalization of connected artefacts*. Two methods of photogrammetric reconstruction were tested: DSLR imagery (Fujifilm X-T30) to generate a 3D point cloud and a mesh (later processed in Autodesk Meshmixer v3p5 and MeshLab v134BETA) (fig.6); respectively digital scanning via mobile app (RealityCapture app on an android device, OnePlus 9pro) (fig.7). This was done to simulate and evaluate the scanning process’ potential to be adapted to non-professional resources and non-specialized users. The aim was to make the tools more accessible to librarians with diverse levels of digital literacy, for them to take over the process without the need of external input. The end product offers an immersive experience for the user.

Figure 5. Digitization process for artefact – catalogue locker. Based on Fujifilm X-T30 imagery, processed in Agisoft Metashape software

Anyone interested in discovering the way books were catalogued and how information was filed in the “old days” can open a real catalogue card file, explore its details in digital form and listen, read or watch on a digital device the librarians’ stories.

Librarian stories also shed light on broader historical contexts, like their daily live during the ’80 or for example the period’s austerity measures under the communist regime:

> "In those days, there weren't many choices, and she [a colleague] would watch the dairy truck that came in Piața Păcii [Peace Square] and [she would say] 'girls, the cow has arrived,' and then everyone would run, grab their coats […] [and] go for milk, for butter because these things weren't available." (Interview 2)

Figure 6. Process phases for rough digitization of artefact – typewriter. Based on Fujifilm X-T30 imagery, processed in Agisoft Metashape software. Váczy, L. and Bartók, K. L. (2019) '50 év a könyvtár szolgálatában'. Kolozsvár: Argonaut.

When it comes to digital reconstruction of library spaces, multiple technologies were employed. A professional Lidar survey was accessible to the team; a space was selected (The Lapedatu Room or the Professors' Reading Room, fig.8). For the prototype, the original point cloud was processed into a smaller, more manageable segment. Reducing the point cloud and the mesh (Agisoft Metashape, Autodesk Meshmixer, CloudCompare software) was limited by the need to preserve interior details (integrated furniture, mouldings). Typically inaccessible spaces can thus become 'open' through technology and oral history. Through an AR application, different areas can be included in a virtual tour.

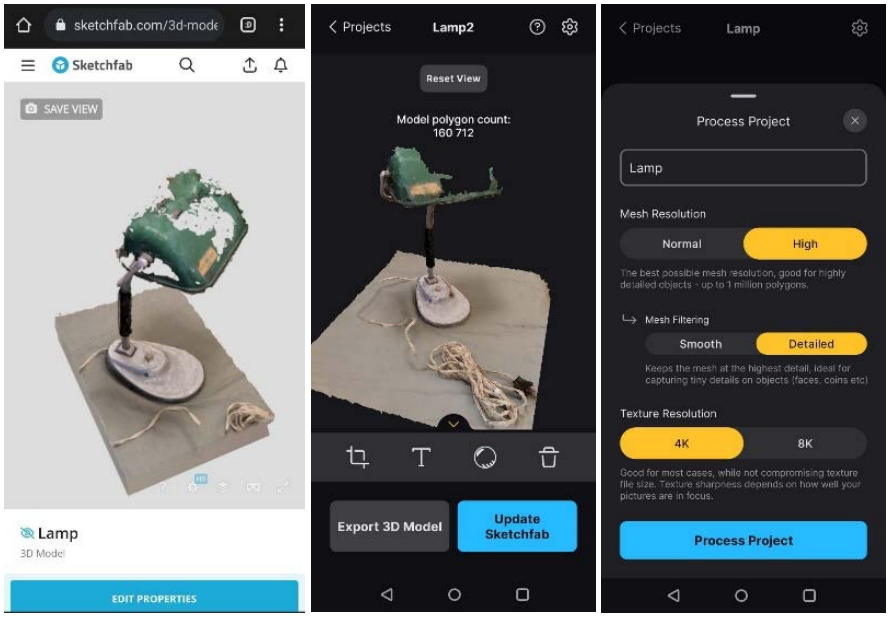

Figure 7. Process phases for rough digitization of artefact – via Realty Capture mobile application.

Conclusion

The proposed application is designed with a very diverse target audience in mind: from students and academic users to non-specialized adults that might be interested in the library's history and librarianship, and to the librarians' group. For the latter, it would be a means to build a voice, a presence as well as an opportunity to self-reflect on their own profession. The digital tools are used to preserve and interpret heritage, to engage audiences, and a way to empower a threatened historic profession. From the librarian perspective, the project supports the exploration of digital tools and improving digital literacy. Yet the most valuable aspect is that the project would allow the librarian community to share their own stories, in their own words and build and represent their own presence, adding to their role of facilitator and information specialist the additional one of curator. Ultimately, it would empower "academic librarians [to] better represent how their labour contributes to the complex ecosystem of digital scholarship in the humanities through […] a documentary practice of digital humanities, one that reveals librarians' positionality within and among other DH stakeholders" (Spencer, Keralis, 2023).

While the project is still in a prototype phase, it has successfully tested a sustainable, replicable and inclusive digital toolbox for preserving, exploring and communicating the cultural heritage of the Central University Library.

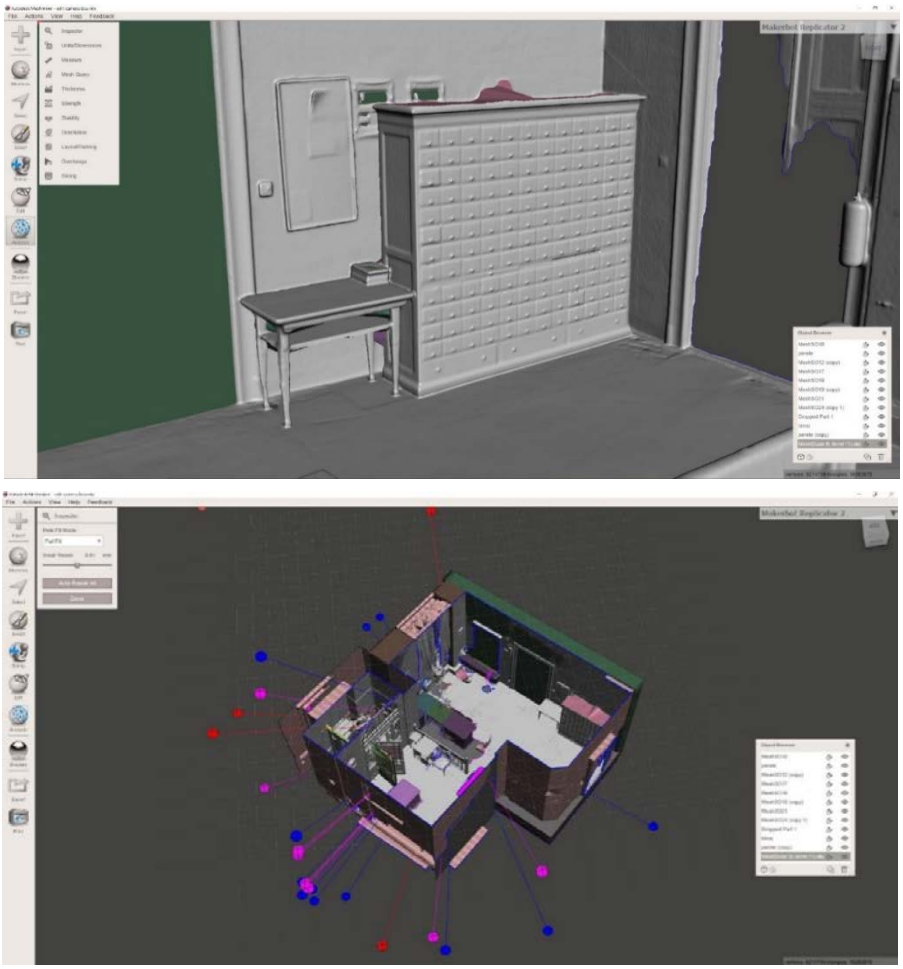

Figure 8. 3D mesh generated from a down-sampled LiDAR point cloud and refined in Autodesk Meshmixer.

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Interviews

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Interview no. 2. Tomuţă, L. (2024). Interview in person with Dragoş Dana, 4 November 2024.

Scenescape-Based Interpretation of Traditional Settlement Heritage: Hongjiang Case Study

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Abstract

This paper examines the adaptability of introducing the concept of “scenescape” into the interpretation of traditional settlement heritage, starting from the complex nature of its interpretive needs and integrating the scenescape concept from urban sociology and environmental behavior studies. Based on field research at the Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town in southwest China, it analyzes the role of the scenescape concept in selecting interpretive themes, linking interpretive carriers, and employing display methods. Findings indicate that the scenescape approach enables holistic heritage preservation, allowing the public to gain intellectual, emotional, moral, and spiritual inspiration through experiential engagement. This approach holds promise as a replicable pathway for interpreting traditional settlement heritage.

Introduction

Traditional settlements are irreplaceable composite heritage sites embodying cultural diversity and carrying multifaceted heritage values. As globalization and heritage tourism deepen, these distinctively local traditional settlements have become ideal destinations for many seeking spiritual belonging. However, the currently commonly used interpretation methods of static preservation of tangible heritage and random display of intangible heritage fail to meet the requirements of overall interpretation of settlement heritage, nor do they establish a deep connection between tourists and heritage. Against this backdrop, a critical challenge for both theory and practice is how to transcend superficial displays and knowledge dissemination. New approaches are needed to accurately, appropriately, and vividly interpret the value of traditional settlement heritage to the public, enabling people to gain emotional and spiritual inspiration through their own experiences interacting with the heritage. In recent years, “scenescape” has emerged as a key term in interdisciplinary research, though predominantly within consumerist and urban contexts. Research linking

this concept to the interpretation of traditional settlement heritage remains largely unexplored. Therefore, this paper synthesizes multidisciplinary “scenescape” research to propose a “Five-Dimensional Scenescape” framework. It distills the essence of the scenescape concept and discusses its applicability in heritage interpretation. Drawing on fieldwork practice in Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town in Southwest China, it explores an interpretation pathway for traditional settlement heritage grounded in the concept of “scenescape.”

Theoretical Framework

The concept of interpretation in the heritage field was introduced by Freeman Tilden. His principle “understanding through interpretation, appreciation through understanding, and preservation through appreciation” revealed the vital role of interpretation in heritage conservation. He described heritage interpretation in 1957, in the most quoted definition that has been used since then, as: “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by first-hand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information” (Tilden, 1957, p.38).

The interpretive guide-sharing heritage with people (Ludwig, 2015) suggests that three cornerstones are important for every interpretive process which is not undertaken by a person on her/his own: the site or object to be experienced, the people experiencing it, the media facilitating its interpretation. This is known as the renowned heritage interpretation triangle. However, the most critical question remains: What ties this threesome together? What achieves the result that participants, after an interpretive experience, feel that it is part of their own life? The fourth element at the center of this triangle, that is the theme, deserves particular attention. Together with the other three elements, it forms a complete new triangle that collectively guides heritage interpretation work: to turn phenomena into experiences, to provoke resonance in participants, to offer paths to deeper meaning, and to foster respect for all heritage.

Regarding the above questions, the concept of “scenescape,” currently debated across multiple disciplines, may offer a systematic response to them. The scenescape discussed here integrates scene studies from the New Chicago School of urban sociology and the environmental behavior studies carried out by Amos Rapoport, unified through the concept of “scenescape.” The New Chicago School's scene theory emphasizes that a “scene” constitutes the cultural atmosphere or aesthetic style of a place. It is a composite of elements including citizen-driven cultural and artistic consumption practices, amenity-oriented public goods, and diverse populations (Silver and Clark, 2016). This scene attracts the clustering of specific social strata through the transmission of cultural values. Overall,

this theory examines the social dynamics driven by class clustering and cultural consumption. It evaluates a place's scene through the quantity, type, and rating system of amenities, aligning with positivism. In traditional settlement studies, environmental psychology's setting research also merits attention. A leading figure in this school is Rapoport, who posits that setting is the optimal way to conceptualize the environment, composed of fixed, semi-fixed, and non-fixed characteristic elements (Rapoport, 1990). He further emphasizes the importance of rules within settings, viewing them as manifestations of underlying cultural values—a qualitative research paradigm.

Comparing these two theories reveals that urban sociology and environmental behavioral studies can complement each other and are applicable to heritage interpretation work. First, regarding research paradigms: traditional settlements contain both sacred ritual spaces and contemporary cultural consumption spaces, which jointly influence heritage interpretation. This complexity necessitates a blend of positivism and empiricism. Second, concerning research scales: sociological studies tend toward macro and meso levels, focusing on overall positioning and comparisons; environmental behavioral studies lean toward meso and micro levels, concentrating on specific spaces and elements. Last but not least, both disciplines place “cultural values” at their core, recognizing these as deep-seated factors shaping a place's characteristic - a perspective that aligns with the “thematic” approach in heritage interpretation. Interpreters, phenomenon, and participants - the central elements of the heritage interpretation triangle - are also key focal points in both theories. The scenescape emerging from integrating these two theories embodies comprehensiveness, experientiality, and orderliness - qualities that align with the core objectives of heritage interpretation. Specifically, the scenescape concept can function across three levels within heritage interpretation: theme selection, elements integration, and specific spatial expression, also striking a balance between the scientific transmission of heritage value and the preferences of participants.

Methodology

The study selected the Hongjiang ancient commercial town in Hunan Province, employing participatory observation and interviews to analyze the role of scenescapes in heritage interpretation efforts within these settlements. Subsequent sections will illustrate this through case studies, examining three dimensions: theme selection, carrier linkage strategies, and display expression methods.

The first step in interpreting traditional settlement heritage is to identify a theme. In such settlements, heritage interpretation may focus on one or multiple themes. However, these themes are not arbitrarily chosen; the local community's values provide an excellent source

of inspiration. The ancient commercial town of Hongjiang boasts a rich heritage of traditional trade culture. Integrity, diligence, and ethical profit-seeking represent invaluable legacies from the settlement's long evolution, each with corresponding spatial locations. For instance, the combination of square and round pillar foundations symbolizes the principle of adhering to principles while embracing flexibility (Figure 1). The Zhongyi security escort agency embodies the concept of loyalty and duty, while the ancient tax bureau entrance bears the admonition against deceiving the gods. These themes readily resonate with participants.

Figure 1. Venue and accompanying plaque illustrating the values of “principle” and “flexibility” in Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town.

The interconnection of heritage carriers serves as a crucial method at the interpretive level in heritage presentation. As a narrative approach to heritage conservation and display, thematic scenescapes link and elevate fragmented information scattered throughout the settlement, presenting it systematically to comprehensively interpret the diverse values of traditional settlements. Within the ancient commercial town of Hongjiang, heritage value interpretation is organized around key sites. Following a commercial cultural thread, it connects multiple spaces, including merchant houses, newspaper offices, and opera stages, to systematically interpret both tangible and intangible heritage across distinct locations (Figure 2).

The concrete expression of a scenescape, however, requires essential support at the micro level. The concept of scenescape emphasizes the organic integration of spatial interfaces, furnishings, and behaviors, as well as the resulting emergence of behavioral activities. Therefore, guided by this concept, interpreters often function as actors—not delivering verbal explanations to participants, but immersing themselves in the activity, either alone or alongside participants. Through this hands-on participation, visitors experience interaction,

resonance, and association, leading to the recognition, reinforcement, and reshaping of the settlement's cultural characteristics and values.

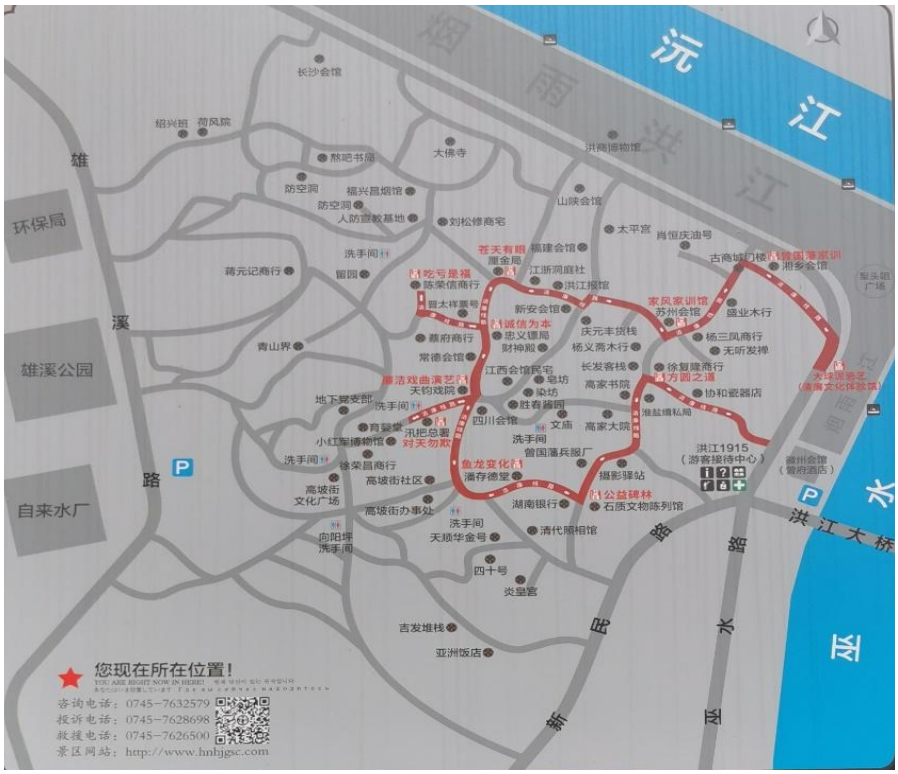

Figure 2. Main tour route of Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town.

The concrete expression of a scenescape, however, requires essential support at the micro level. The concept of scenescape emphasizes the organic integration of spatial interfaces, furnishings, and behaviors, as well as the resulting emergence of behavioral activities. Therefore, guided by this concept, interpreters often function as actors—not delivering verbal explanations to participants, but immersing themselves in the activity, either alone or alongside participants. Through this hands-on participation, visitors experience interaction, resonance, and association, leading to the recognition, reinforcement, and reshaping of the settlement's cultural characteristics and values. At Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town, actors daily portray merchants, security escort leaders, and couriers within the Zhongyi security escort agency, vividly recreating the historical scenes of commissioned task transactions (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Performance in Zhongyi security escort agency.

Similarly, at the local military administrative office of the Qing dynasty (Figure 4), actors portray officials and merchants, performing scripted scenes that bring the era's governance system to life. Visitors, seated in the audience or observing up close, gain vivid insights into the heritage site's history through these interpretive performances.

Figure 4. Performance in the local military administrative office

Results

Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town has consciously or unconsciously applied elements of the concept of scene-setting, achieving relatively good results. Many visitors report retaining vivid impressions of these scenes long after departure, linking them to their personal experiences. While professionally managed, local residents remain integral participants and beneficiaries. This distinctive approach to heritage interpretation grants Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town a competitive edge in the region, yielding substantial economic, social, cultural, and environmental benefits. In recent years, Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town has become a popular destination for tourists, study tour groups, photographers, scientific researchers, and many other groups. According to data provided by the local government's publicity department, tourism revenue from Hongjiang Ancient Commercial Town has become an important support for local economic and social development. It achieves holistic heritage preservation while fostering sustainable community development.

Conclusions and Reflections

Traditional settlement heritage constitutes a composite living heritage, requiring an integrated approach to its interpretation. The concept of “scenescape” aligns with the demands of traditional settlement heritage interpretation, offering a comprehensive and valuable perspective. This framework can be applied to three levels: the selection of interpretive themes, the connection of interpretive elements, and the specific spatial expression. First, local beliefs and values are the core content of the scenescape, often serving as appropriate themes for interpreting traditional settlement heritage, carrying unique local significance. Community values should also be included in professional training courses for heritage interpretation. Furthermore, the scenescape approach emphasizes the organic coordination of discrete elements to achieve a holistic understanding of heritage. Therefore, interpreters need to look beyond single heritage elements and organize the connections between heritage interpretation content from a systematic perspective. Finally, under this methodology, some interpreters may need to learn to become scriptwriters and actors, using performances to combine props, sound, light, and scents in specific spaces to enable participants to immerse themselves in past historical events and reach a deeper level of meaning. This model provides concrete operational pathways for traditional settlement heritage interpretation, supports sustainable community development, and holds significant potential for broader application.

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Heritage Interpretation by Roleplay: The case of the Royal Court at the Wawel Royal Castle

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Abstract

I aim to focus on a specific example of an educational LARP, *The Royal Court (Królewski Sąd)*, developed as part of the educational offerings of the Wawel Royal Castle. This game is based on a historical event that took place at the castle in the 16th century. LARP (live-action role-playing) games are becoming increasingly popular. Alongside their growing appeal, the educational potential of such games has been recognized, leading to the emergence of educational LARPs as a distinct genre. These games constitute a form of immersive role-playing, offering participants an intimate engagement with the theme being explored. In the context of heritage interpretation, it serves as stepping stone. It is worth exploring this issue, especially since LARPs are becoming a very popular form of non-formal teaching in Poland. My analysis of this specific game will illustrate the potential of educational LARPs for heritage interpretation, employing the methodology of Interpret Europe.

Introduction

Cultural institutions are increasingly adopting innovative educational approaches. Tools that are slowly being introduced as a follow-up to traditional lessons or lectures involve engaging participants through games. These can be field games, task cards, or LARPs (live action role-playing games). The educational potential of LARPs is slowly being discovered and applied by a growing number of institutions. This is leading to an evolution of existing formats for conducting museum lessons. One such institution is the Wawel Royal Castle, which is incorporating these types of games into its educational programme. This example perfectly illustrates the combination of new educational forms with heritage interpretation methods developed by Interpret Europe.

Live Action Role-Playing (LARP) in Education

LARP is an acronym for Live Action Role-Playing game. These games have been present in Poland for at least 34 years, and their popularity continues to grow (Pierzchała, 2025) [Accessed 28.08.2025]. LARPs are narrative games where participants (players) embody various characters, collaboratively weaving a story. The experience resembles a form of improvised theatre. The action can take place in a fictional or historical setting. A Game Master oversees the overall framework, but the narrative's progression depends entirely on the players' creativity. LARPs can be categorized as field games, battle games, or those played in a home setting (Larpunk, n.d.). Increasingly, LARPs are being recognized as valuable tools in education. An educational LARP, also known as an edu-LARP, is a tool employed by cultural institutions for educational purposes. The potential of edu-LARPs is gradually being discovered and applied by more and more institutions. This is leading to an evolution of existing museum lesson formats and aids in the reinterpretation of heritage sites, moving beyond their sole association with academic learning. Edu-LARPs offer more than just an engaging experience. By embodying historical figures, participants gain diverse perspectives on various aspects of life. These games help them apply knowledge (e.g., historical facts) in a practical context, demonstrating its relevance (Guardian Adventures, n.d.) [Accessed 28.08.2025]. Furthermore, they encourage critical thinking and creativity to solve problems from centuries past.

Figure 1. Larp Kroniki Deadwood by Adrianna Ososińska-Adamska, photo by Maciej Margielski

"Royal Court": A Case Study

"Royal Court" originated as a concept for fulfilling student internships within the education department of Wawel Royal Castle. The initial creators were Łukasz Sułowski and Arkadiusz Ostwald. The game's first iteration was conducted for Erasmus students. The head of the department recognized the format's potential, providing an opportunity for the game's further development. Currently, Łukasz Sułowski, Kamil Błach, and Misza Majcherczyk are responsible for "Royal Court," continuously expanding its scope. The game's narrative centers around a jousting tournament at Wawel between Ilya Ostrogsky and Sigismund Augustus. Ilya falls from his horse, sustaining severe internal injuries that lead to his death several months later. The game explores the consequences of this tournament.
Ilya's widow, Beata, arrives at Wawel to request the Polish king's confirmation of the will and his protection. She is accompanied by both her supporters and opponents, who lay claim to parts of the deceased's inheritance or lands. Moreover, the royal court itself is populated by many figures who seek to gain something from the situation.

Players assume the roles of specific historical, semi-historical, and fictional characters, each with their own, more or less noble, objectives. The players' task is to achieve these goals through alliances, compromises, persuasion, counsel, or deception. The game can accommodate up to 30 participants, though smaller groups often prove more effective. Before the game begins, a brief lecture combined with a castle tour is conducted. During this, players are introduced to the history of tournaments, court ceremonies, the king's role (including his judicial function), social relations and realities, and, of course, the specific historical context of the case. Next, roles are assigned (players choose them whenever possible), and participants are divided into two factions – Polish and Ruthenian. While goals may overlap within these groups, players can freely interact, converse, and negotiate. After roles are assigned and positions taken, players familiarize themselves with their character sheets, make initial decisions regarding their objectives, and begin their intrigues. Educators observe the progress during this time, offering advice and guidance as needed. Players have approximately one hour. During this time, they can converse freely among themselves (including privately), seek an audience with the royal family (or be summoned), or engage in duels (or be sentenced for them). After the hour, final postulates are presented. The king issues a verdict and decisions (based on the information and postulates presented to him), and the educator describes the potential future consequences and events of the decisions made. Finally, the educator concludes by explaining how the conflict historically resolved.

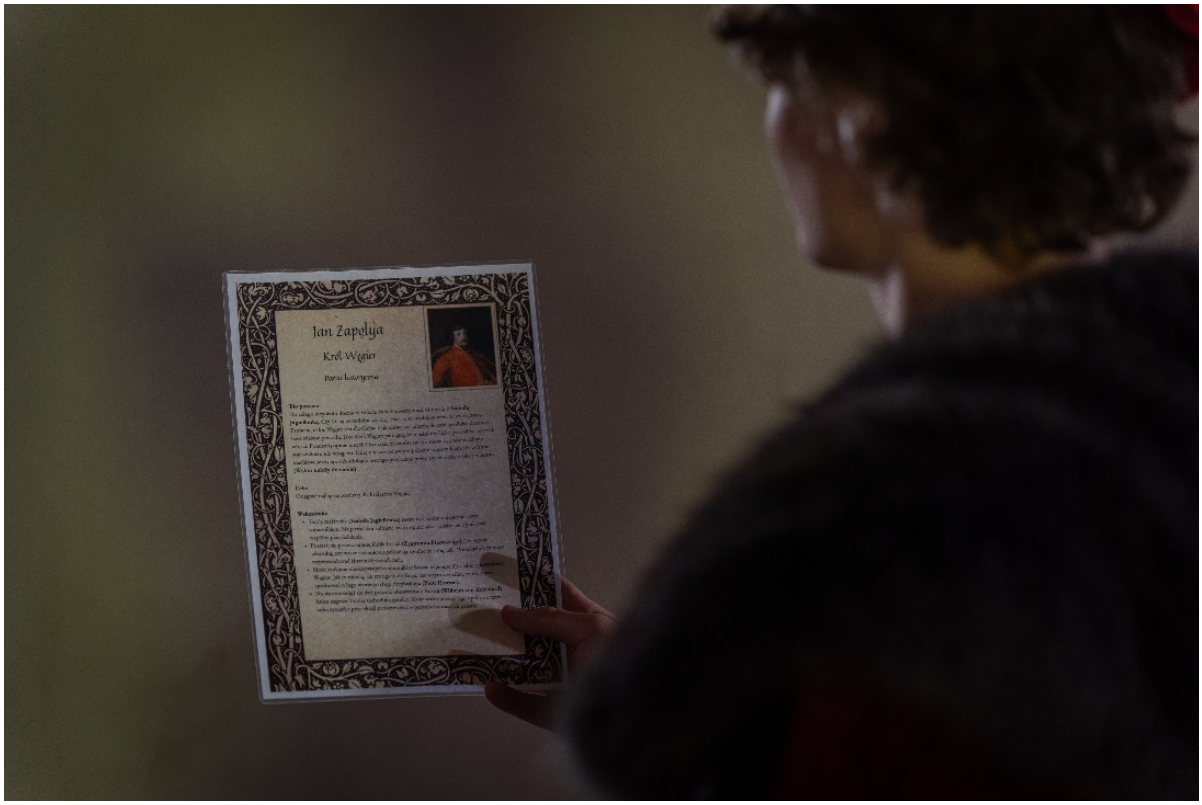

Figure 2. Photoshoot promoting The Royal Court. Photo by Adam Golec

Connecting LARPs to Heritage Interpretation

How does this relate to heritage interpretation? Referring to Freeman Tilden's principles of heritage interpretation, developed in 1957, we draw attention to a specific point, specifically point 4: "The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation” (Tilden, 1957/1977, p. 9). This brings us to the interpretive triangle, a tool used by Interpret Europe. We have the interpreter, the visitors, and the phenomenon. In our case, these are: the educator, the students/participants, and Wawel Royal Castle, respectively. Our game focuses on transforming the castle from merely a place to visit into an environment that allows for the experience of situations from several centuries ago. The castle is associated with numerous emotions and flesh-and-blood historical figures. By evoking emotions in participants, we build connections with the site on a different level. Through experience, they remember situations that became part of their character's story, prompting them to discuss and remember. In doing so, we create memories that may encourage these individuals to return in the future or to delve deeper into the subject. We also utilize stepping stones. Stepping stones are tools used to facilitate the access to one of the corners of the interpretive triangle (Ludwig, 2015, p. 38). In our case, these include character cards designed in a Renaissance style, as well as headwear, clothing, and maps. All these elements help participants immerse themselves in the atmosphere of a 16th-century court.

And it works! After each game, we prepare a survey, and requests for more elements (e.g., clothing) frequently appear. Participants thoroughly enjoy these aspects. The game itself, according to Interpret Europe, is considered a stepping stone. I believe this is an apt comparison, as it is precisely through the game that participants connect with heritage.

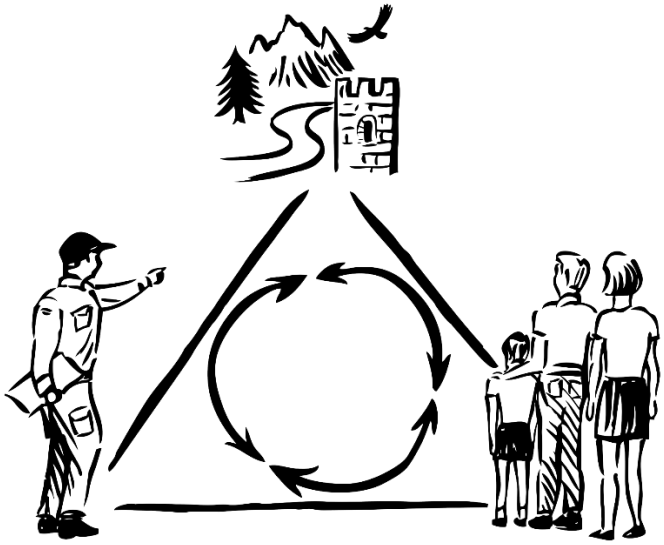

Figure 3. Thorsten Ludwig, The Interpretive Guide. Sharing Heritage with People, drawing: Philip Rutt

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe that LARPs and heritage interpretation are perfectly combined, forming a synergy that not only helps increase awareness of historical life but also encourages personal immersion into the past and an understanding of "one's character's" story. This is an interactive event that can help engage and bring heritage closer to individuals. Furthermore, it offers something novel, potentially broadening horizons and perhaps even inspiring a lasting interest in this engaging activity.

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Interpretation in Transition: An Exploratory Framework for Considering Transit Populations as Active Heritage Interpreters

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Abstract

This paper explores an understudied dimension of cultural heritage interpretation: the notion of a *transit country*, as that between origin and destination, and perspectives on cultural heritage monuments and sites created by international migrants during transit between places. It argues that considering transit populations as an overlooked group of interpreters with temporary, yet unique travel routes may reveal novel notions about the relation between people and places. The understanding of cultural heritage interpretation used in this paper is built on the conceptual framing proposed by Ashworth (1994): interpretation is the process of meaning-making in which historical facts, sites, and phenomena (resources) are being transformed into cultural heritage (products) serving some contemporary function. However, in contrast to Ashworth's (1994) commodification of history, the product of interpretation assumed by this paper would be new knowledge furthering the re-conceptualisation of migration and heritage studies in the context of globalisation.

Introduction

This paper investigates the intersection of cultural heritage and migration studies, focusing on the notion of a *transit country*, as that between origin and destination, and proposes expanding cultural heritage interpretation to include interpretations by international migrants during transit between countries. The work has an exploratory character and seeks to open a conceptual space for reflecting on how transit populations might contribute to heritage discourse and how meanings embedded in cultural heritage might contribute to migration studies.

The motivation for this exploration emerges from recognising two parallel limitations in academic fields. Migration studies, while essential for understanding patterns in global

movements, often inadvertently positions migrants as passive victims (de Haas, 2021). Simultaneously, heritage studies, despite evolving beyond traditional understanding of monuments and sites, continues to prioritise interpretations shaped by the Authorised Heritage Discourse (Smith, 2006) which excludes temporary residents' perspectives and experiences. Both limitations set restrictions on the knowledge generated in each field.

This reflection assumes that disciplinary boundaries might be limiting our understanding of how and by whom cultural heritage is interpreted and potentially interfering with contextualising both research fields in the broader context of globalisation. The paper proposes to expand the interpreters of heritage to international migrants and imagine whether cultural landscapes may be enriched by the perspectives of the transit populations defined by high mobility rather than the feeling of permanent belonging.

The discussion that follows neither aims to resolve the theoretical tensions nor does it provide methodological frameworks for implementation. Instead, it introduces the idea that the informal label of a *transit country* might be a part of the cultural landscape and that inherently international migrants are actors who are able to bring insights about the relationship between mobility, place-making, and cultural meaning. These conceptual shifts potentially might enrich both migration and heritage studies as well as open up a space for international migrants to have a more active role in the process of knowledge creation.

Conceptual Framework

Research that combines heritage and migration studies tends to describe migrants as victims of political, social, economic or climate issues and focuses on the integration and assimilation of migrants in the cultural landscape of the receiving country. While such work is essential for creating welcoming environments in the host countries, it also supports the "receiving country" (de Haas, 2021) within the field of migration studies, a one-sided focus on migration from the perspective of the host-countries. Such an approach towards research can unintentionally assume that people are pushed and pulled across the globe with little agency, often ignoring another side of the migration: the situation in the countries of origin. As a result, migrants are positioned as the passive beneficiaries of such research works and another side of migration remains with little attention (de Haas, 2021).

Fundamentally, migration studies investigate compositions of groups and cultures, their movements, the reasoning behind, and the consequences for individuals and societies. Despite the attempt to describe the movement patterns of people, de Hass argues (2021, p. 3) that many discussions essentially oversimplify the migration process by squeezing causation and explanation into push and pull factors. Migration studies thus struggle to

generate meaningful knowledge of human agency because of the theoretical assumptions behind empirical research. De Haas suggests (2021, p. 11) that, among other approaches, re-theorising migration studies might derive from combinations of disciplinary perspectives, including merging with perspectives, methodologies and data of cultural studies.

Within the field of cultural heritage studies, heritage discourse has evolved from the notion of sites, monuments, and buildings (Smith, 2006) to a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between people and places and the way this connection is communicated (Harvey, 2001; Waterton and Smith, 2009; The Council of the European Union, 2014; Dicks, 2000; Byrne 2009; Bendix 2009). The informational backbone of cultural heritage studies is qualitative data about groups understanding themselves and creating values, meanings, and connections with places. A part of it includes observations about cities and changes in cultural landscapes because of the people's movements. For example, UNESCO's Recommendation on the Historic Urban Landscape (2011) suggests recognising the urban landscape as a combination of layers, from a site's physical features to cultural practices and the dimension of heritage related to diversity and identity.

Trajectories of international migration shape perceptions of countries. A key example in the present context concerns migrants from Southern and Eastern countries transitioning to European countries perceiving Belarus as a *transit country*. The informal label of a *transit country* pertains to a country being a transit space between travel destinations, which is related to how international travel routes are shaped. On those pathways, internationally migrating people often encounter heritage sites and cultural landscapes, capturing the essence of them in their memory and perhaps in photos. In doing so, they generate an image of the country that differs from the one that regular vacationing tourists have. The common misconception is that transitioning people do not remember or notice any cultural sites. However, this bias excludes from heritage debates roughly 3,6% of the world population based on the numbers from 2020 (de Haas, 2024, p. 27).

This paper considers migrants as interpreters of the cultural heritage of the countries that they are transitioning through. The understanding of cultural heritage interpretation used in this paper is built on the conceptual framing proposed by Ashworth (1994): interpretation is the process of meaning-making in which historical facts, sites, and phenomena (resources) are being transformed into cultural heritage (products) serving some contemporary function. However, in contrast to Ashworth's (1994) commodification of history, the product of interpretation assumed by this paper would be new knowledge furthering the re-conceptualisation of migration and heritage studies in the context of globalisation. The

guiding question for further research is *“What cultural elements and meanings could the informal “transit country” label potentially bring to the cultural landscape of the country?”*

The next paragraphs will highlight a common knowledge interest of migration and heritage studies and invite researchers to consider such an interdisciplinary merge, stepping beyond the theme of integration.

Shared Academic Concerns and Disciplinary Overlap

The contemporary need and attempts to re-conceptualise both migration (de Haas, 2021) and cultural heritage studies (Waterton and Smith, 2009) happen in light of globalisation. It is important to note that limitations within academic fields reflect not only theoretical research limitations but resemble wider social and political issues in society too, for example exclusion and marginalisation in general. In the current world, where one person throughout a lifetime carries multiple cultural identities and belongs to different places, the primary function of cultural heritage – to define a national identity – is becoming more contested.

Some of the theoretical approaches about co-existing cultural identities include reflections on the meaning of multicultural society. Berry suggests (2011, p. 2.4-2.5) that multiculturalism is a result of successful integration: when an individual maintains their culture of origin and participates in other cultures of the larger society that they live in. Originally, by “interaction with larger society” Berry (2011, p. 2.5.) means interactions with dominant and non-dominant cultures of the larger society and provides examples of interactions such as language learning and use, and connections with other people. However, what does multicultural society mean in practice today and what could be measured as substantial enough to be considered integrated?

A thought experiment: Berlin (Germany) at the end of 2024 consisted of residents from roughly 190 countries. Such diversity of countries also implies a number of cultures that shape the city (Nationalities registered in Berlin, no date). What would integration mean in practice in Berlin? What number and formats of interactions might be considered enough to be integrated in Berlin? Is even the question of integration relevant for the city with a population roughly close to 4 million people? Potentially the challenge answering those questions might lie in the tension created by the simultaneous existence of nationalism and globalism. What is the way to approach reflection about multicultural globalised society that stands beyond the division integrated/marginalised?

Study of migration trajectories from the cultural point of view does not give an immediate answer to balancing out nationalism and globalism. The potential findings are as yet unclear. However, such an approach suggests a tool for a more inclusive qualitative data creation

process that might contribute to both migration and heritage studies. Such study would be fundamentally possible with the leap of faith that residents, citizens and authorities of the country are not the only ones able and allowed to interpret the cultural heritage of it.

Interpretation of the past that is open to be performed by international migrants might bring unexpected discoveries, comparisons, and perceptions on both the culture of the transit countries as well as on the cultures of people's origins. The more essential part, however, is not what is interpreted but who are the interpreters.

Implementing such an approach into further education or professionalisation of cultural heritage would require professional development in both heritage and migration fields. Researchers and practitioners from heritage and migration fields might benefit from training in cross-cultural communication and methods of ethical research and space facilitation, considering power dynamics and potential past traumatic experiences. Educational curricula in both fields might benefit from incorporating modules on interdisciplinary methods, emphasising how mobility shapes cultural understanding.

Conclusion

This paper has proposed that international migrants are overlooked as interpreters in cultural heritage studies. Recognising transit populations as active agents in heritage interpretation, rather than passive beneficiaries of it, contributes to advancing more inclusive approaches to both heritage and migration studies.

Study of migration trajectories from the cultural point of view suggests a research direction that combines heritage and migration fields and enables researchers to investigate how mobility shapes cultural understanding and what heritage interpretations might originate from the interaction between people and places during a deliberate transit to another location. Migrants' perspectives, shaped by comparative experiences across multiple cultural backgrounds, could reveal dimensions of heritage significance that remain invisible to permanent residents, citizens, authorities and regular tourists.

While heritage discourse, not without a struggle, favours local settled communities, migrants' temporary interactions with cultural sites may reveal novel notions about the relation between people and places in the globalised world. This conceptual shift requires acknowledging that the informal label of a *transit country* is itself a part of a cultural landscape which reflects migration patterns and high levels of mobility. In the long-term, researching transitioning not solely as a functional movement between places but as a form of cultural engagement might become one of the the pillars supporting re-conceptualisation of heritage and migration studies in the context of globalisation.

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