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The Ename Charter and As a Tool for Effective Public Interpretation

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This paper will briefly survey some of the new philosophical approaches and technological tools for the public presentation of archaeological sites and historic monuments and landscapes that have been developed in Europe in recent years. It will describe the central concepts of the Ename Charter Initiative, carried out under the sponsorship of ICOMOS, which seeks to establish a set of international professional standards for the interpretation of public heritage resources. The initial charter draft includes four main sections. It stresses the importance of scholarly standards for virtual reconstructions and other computer recreations and underlines the dangers of interpretive technology that is too elaborate or more concerned with visitor satisfaction than historical accuracy. It urges the integrated planning of site presentation projects, o ering recommendations for cooperative strategies in which scholars, managers, and community members can set quantifiable and achievable goals for heritage projects particularly in regard to educational and social goals for the local population beyond the mere raising of tourist revenues. It also deals with sustainability and quality-of-life issues, in which realistic projections of site carrying capacity should determined at the outset and the final form of the heritage site's presentation is designed, not as a conspicuous "tourist attraction," but as a natural part of the community's landscape and daily patterns of life. Finally, it emphasizes the need for programs aimed at four distinct audiences: local school children, adults in the local community, university students, and heritage professionals.

The need for such a set of general international guidelines is especially pressing, since Europe particularly in its rapidly expanding incarnation as the European Union possesses an extraordinary quantity of recognized, preserved, and heavily visited historical monuments and archaeological sites. These range in magnitude from World Heritage Sites and international cultural attractions, to regional landmarks, to places of strictly local significance. Likewise their states of preservation, presentation, and maintenance vary widely from well-equipped, well-sta ed, and packed with satisfied visitors to crumbling, abandoned, and all too often, littered with garbage and scarred by gra ti. The situation is similar in other parts of the world and archaeologists everywhere are playing an increasingly important role in addressing the central challenges of conservation both in the areas of planning and in the physical preservation of significant material remains.

It has become abundantly clear that the activity of *physical* conservation, though the indispensable core and focus of all attempts to preserve the material heritage for future generations, is entangled in a dense web of political, economic, social, and even psychological relationships that if ignored can doom even the most sophisticated restoration projects to neglect and eventual destruction (Hall & McArthur, 1998). Thus the initial stage of professionalizing and codifying the international standards for physical preservation (exemplified by the 1964 Charter of Venice and the 1992 Malta Convention) has been broadened and strengthened by the formulation of international standards on professional training, heritage tourism, and cultural site management, among others (Petzet and Ziesemer, 2000). All have addressed the importance of site interpretation in varying degrees of detail, but have rarely examined the relationship between the various types of interpretation that might be subtly connected to the success or ultimate failure of continuing preservation e orts at a heritage site.

The modern social function of interpretation its modes, its audiences, and the various public, private and professional interests that

determine its form and meanings is of paramount concern. The local community's general and personal identification with the site, no less than the sophistication of the formulation and presentation of its significance by (usually) outside scholars, designers, and educators, can determine whether it will be maintained and protected by everyone, from the mayor, to the members of the local preservation society, to the general public, to the neighbors, or even to a bored, unemployed 17-year-old with a can of spray-paint.

In recent years, the importance of interpretation has been acknowledged among international heritage professionals, and the range of practical applications and scholarly literature on this subject have expanded enormously (e.g., Little, 2002; Uzzell & Ballantyne, 1999; Jameson, 1997). Traditional didactic, museum-type text displays are now utilized mostly when budgetary constraints mandate only the cheapest, no-frills presentation rather than by choice. More creative and energetic interpretive solutions, such as special-interest or thematic guided tours, costumed or character-based interpreters, special educational activities, and interactive applications and virtual reality experiences, are usually utilized when the project budget permits. But they are of widely di ering cost, quality, and technical means. And their impact on visitors, on attendance figures, and indeed on the perception of the site as a whole among the local community, have only now begun to be studied in great detail.

Among the increasingly popular multimedia solutions particularly virtual reconstructions a basic problem exists. Scientific standards of evidence and proper archaeological documentation, through which the virtual reconstruction might have a demonstrable connection with reality is a subject that is widely discussed, yet not yet solved (Frischer *et al.*, 2002). A common scientific solution to use conspicuously unrealistic schematic models that allow for incompleteness often fail to capture the attention and imagination of visitors (especially younger visitors, accustomed from infancy to watching television and playing video games). Yet the most elaborate of the virtual presentations, loosed from the bonds of what is perceived as overly aggressive scholarly oversight, are so perfect in their vivid recreations that they are sometimes more Hollywood than heritage.

The gulf between scholarship and entertainment is itself part of a central philosophical problem in heritage interpretation today. In an era when public culture budgets are shrinking and cultural institutions of all kinds are being forced to be self-sustaining, the viability of a preservation and presentation project is, in the long run, often tied to its success in stimulating economic development by paid admissions, subsidiary sales of postcards and other museum-shop items, employment opportunities, and a steady flow of tourist revenue for hotels, shops, and restaurants in the immediate vicinity (e.g., Leask & Yeoman, 1999). Finances and balance sheets are the real tyrants in this age of increasingly self-supporting culture. Everything may look perfect to the invited dignitaries and guests at an elaborately preserved and interpreted site on a festive opening day. But three to five years later, when unrealistic expectations of increased visitation have failed to materialize and the costs of adequate sta ng, maintenance, and regular content updating have soared, its physical state and its once-enthusiastic acceptance by its promoters and the general public may have radically changed for the worse.

These are some of the challenges regarding the wider roles of interpretation within the larger preservation e ort that led to the idea for the Ename Charter Initiative on "Authenticity, Intellectual Integrity and Sustainable Development in the Public Presentation of Archaeological and Historical Sites and Landscapes." In the last year, three preliminary drafts of the charter text have been produced by the sta of the Ename Center under the sponsorship of the Institute of the Archaeological Heritage of the Flemish Community of Belgium and the Province of East-Flanders both long time supporters of the public presentation program at the site of Ename itself. The initial charter drafts have been circulated for continuing review and revision under the auspices of ICOMOS, and are available for general review at http://www.enamecharter.org.

A central theme is the importance of integrated planning in which the interpretation is not seen merely as the attractive or enlightening feature that is meant to fill the silences and empty spaces of a physical site. Interpretation must e ectively communicate significance and be the rationale for the preservation project itself. The present charter draft text is divided into sections on scientific and professional guidelines; planning, funding and management;

tourism aspects; and heritage education. Its goal is to address the most common problems that have time and again doomed lovingly preserved sites to become deteriorating eyesores in just a few years.

Regarding the physical infrastructure of interpretive programs, the present draft of the Ename Charter makes some general recommendations. The careful consideration of size, scale, intrusiveness, and appropriate technology must be one of the first elements in the planning of a preservation project and not solely on the basis of educational or informational criteria but also on the kind of an infrastructure that a particular site is capable of supporting in a sustainable, long-term way. Budgets available or anticipated in succeeding years for proper sta ng, maintenance, and security should become a primary factor in determining the ambitiousness of the presentation at the very start.

With regard to the information conveyed in the interpretation, particularly archaeological sites, a basic method of allowing visitors to recognize the di erence between authentic remains and conjectured reconstructions without detracting from the coherence of the presentation must somehow be made. An even more complex challenge is accommodating sometimes widely di ering meanings of the site and possible relationships to it by di erent classes of young, old, local, foreign, male, and female visitors. The main significance of a castle kitchen, stable, or chapel, for example, is neither single nor unequivocal to various visitors. And this is where the usefulness of interactive installations is particularly evident permitting visitors to explore a wide range of possible interpretations o ers a flexible personalized approach.

In the larger issue of project planning, the continuous, close consultation with the local community is stressed. The charter draft suggests that representatives of the local community be meaningfully involved in the creation of their own historical self-representation and that they be given the opportunity to o er comments and constructive suggestions at every stage of the work. In addition, the physical impact likely to be felt by the residents around an interpreted site must also be considered and carefully balanced with the needs of touristic development and e ective integration with the local economy.

Lastly, it is stressed that the raising of visitor attendance figures or increasing visitor attendance alone should not be the only target or criterion of success. The presentation must also serve a range of educational and social objectives for the benefit of the local community. These may include special educational programs, training and employment opportunities in the interpretive programs, and regularly scheduled community activities. The underlying rationale for all of these recommendations is the achievement of a basic and far-reaching transformation. Not of an excavated site into a beautifully and entertainingly presented site but rather of an excavated site into an active, dynamic cultural institution within a living community.

We at the Ename Center welcome input, suggestions, and reactions to the ICOMOS-Ename Charter as it is expanded and improved through intensive review and revision under the auspices of ICOMOS. But it may be worthwhile to skip ahead briefly to consider the possibility that some day, in some form, an international charter on interpretive standards and techniques may indeed be adopted and widely accepted. Will that solve all our problems? It has long been assumed that increasing the quality or extent of site interpretation will increase public awareness and thus interest in participating in the wider preservation cause itself. But is this always true? Will we pay enough attention to both the art of creating vivid public interpretations and to the social significance of the newly-established heritage site as an element in the complex landscape of a modern community?

Indeed, the positive impact of interpretation on preservation is not to be taken for granted. Recent studies (e.g., Lowenthal, 2002) and our experience in European heritage projects has shown that, in the planning stages, if the right balance is not achieved between the contribution of outside professionals and the input from the local community, the preservation project, even if successful, can appear to local residents as an outside imposition like a shopping mall or private theme park with solely or mainly economic significance for the community. If it succeeds, the commercial benefits will make those with a direct economic stake in its success or failure potentially great supporters of preservation. Yet it can also sow resentment among those not immediately benefiting from the gains, and who often su er from the successful site's

side e ects a lack of parking, tra c congestion, and disruption of normal routines. It can thus be dismissed as “someone else’s” monument, an alien intrusion not meaningfully integrated into the memories, stories, and attitudes that constitute the entire community’s shared identity.

Thus the key linkage between interpretation and preservation lies not only in professional creativity, technology and rational planning, but also in the intensity and honesty of interaction with the local community and in the depth of commitment to creating a valuable local institution sustainable in the long run not because of how it looks or what information it contains, but for how it functions within the community. Its sustainability is a function of its social relevance and benefit to the local inhabitants. And that modern dimension of heritage must become an integral part of preservation planning.

There is no question that interpretation has great potential for stimulating a public interest in preservation. But it can only do so when all of the potential preservers from scholars, to design consultants, to heritage administrators, to business people, to that 17-year-old with a can of spray paint are meaningfully involved in what is perceived as a community e ort and have reason to consider the site not only “theirs,” but also an important part of their lives. That is an intellectual and social challenge that any true preservationist of the twenty-first century must increasingly be forced to confront.

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