The impact of visitor centres on sites of historic and cultural value.

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1. ABSTRACT

The re-development of visitor centres and interpretation facilities on sites of historic and cultural importance raises the question of the intended purpose and the value such new facilities add to the visitor experience. Across the United Kingdom can be found examples of significant architectural additions to sensitive sites. In Wales there is an ongoing programme of improving facilities to historic sites under the guardianship of the Welsh Assembly Government which includes the insertion of new, and sometimes quite modern, structures alongside historic building fabric. This paper explores the significance of the visitor centre on the Welsh historic environment in terms of an architectural and user context and it compares the intended impact with the built result. The visitor centre, often located prominently at entrances, may be the first point of contact for the public to the site. Through subsequent research based on selected case studies, the aim is to review the impact of new facilities on the overall character and conservation of the site and consider the impact on visitor experience. In addition, from a management perspective, the research aims to consider how an organisation can use the visitor centre as a means of providing an effective service delivery for the visitor and as part of a visitor management strategy.

Keywords: visitor centre; interpretation facilities; visitor management

2. INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

This paper is a critical review of visitor centres and interpretation facilities on sites of historic and cultural importance. In Wales there have been many such facilities inserted into a variety of sensitive sites ranging from castles under the guardianship of Cadw through to woodland settings under Forestry Commission ownership. Although the intended research focuses on Welsh examples it is anticipated the investigation will have relevance to any national or international site in a similar context. In addition to the architectural qualities of the visitor centre, their role in relation to providing a positive visitor experience is also considered. This work is also a preliminary study that will form the basis of a more detailed research project and possible PhD.

The provision of a new visitor or interpretation centre can be evaluated firstly in terms of its intrinsic value to a site and secondly, whether it is fit for purpose. If a new centre can be shown to add no value to a site then it follows it cannot be fit for purpose. Equally, a building that, in principle has value could still fail to be fit for purpose as a design solution. Managing historic assets effectively is a key objective in ensuring the protection and enhancement of what makes a place important and culturally significant. A visitor or interpretation centre can contribute to a site by re-affirming its significance and cultural context. Worthing and Bond [1] suggest that conservation activity needs to be considered holistically and that management strategies are just as important as technical issues related to the care and repair of the historic fabric. In 2005 Dan Wolfe [2], of English Heritage, acknowledged that an emphasis on popular enjoyment of the heritage is leading to new and innovative approaches to presenting the past. This is part of their strategy to target income growth from their properties over the next ten years as income from visitors makes a significant contribution to the running cost of English Heritage.

The relationship of tourism and sites of historic or cultural importance cannot be underestimated. For the agencies charged with managing such sites including the National Trust, English Heritage and Cadw, there is an apparent paradox. On the one hand there is a responsibility to ensure the preservation and maintenance of a site but, on the other, a commercial need to cater for the paying
customer by providing an ‘experience’ for the visitor in addition to the usual creature comforts. By encouraging more visitors more income can be generated but with increasing popularity comes a growing threat to physical damage to the very sites the agencies serve to protect. Orbasli [3] observes there are conflicting arguments between the need to provide a deeper understanding and the superficiality of contemporary life. One of the characteristics of the tourism industry is the tendency towards commodification of the experiences and destinations and, according to Laws [4], this trend is also apparent in heritage tourism. Despite the economic benefits of heritage tourism he believes it should not be seen merely as an economic asset as heritage of a place is part of the cultural stock of the community.

Three key issues are identified and these will form the basis of further research beyond this paper:

1. To consider if it is ever acceptable to embellish architectural and historic monuments worthy of preservation with extensions or insertion of new buildings.

2. Whether interpretation and understanding of a site enhances the visitor experience and, if so, how this can be effectively achieved.

3. How technology can assist delivery of interpretation in the future. For example, whether interpretation in the future can increasingly use virtual reality and augmented reality rather than using new building interventions.

3. BACKGROUND AND CONSERVATION THEORY

The philosophy of architectural conservation is rooted in the work of people such as John Ruskin and William Morris in the nineteenth century. The manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) set up in 1877 is held to be still relevant today and in general the principles of minimum intervention and respect for the past underline current conservation approaches. Internationally, this approach has also been adopted. International collaboration in conservation began in 1931 in Athens where delegates debated the protection of architectural monuments with recommendations based on SPAB principles recorded as the Athens Charter. Subsequently the Venice Charter of 1964 saw the establishment of ICOMOS as an international mission to ‘promote and support best practice in the conservation, care and understanding of the historic environment’ [5].

The care and management of cultural landscapes, whether natural or man-made, are considered at international level. The UNESCO ‘World Heritage Convention’ of 1972 requires that a world heritage list be maintained by an inter-government World Heritage Committee. World heritage sites range from individual monuments and sites such as Stonehenge through to complete environments such as the city of Bath. Shackley [6], writing about visitor management at world heritage sites, notes that the majority of visitors to such sites are motivated by an interest in heritage and culture although they may lack any prior knowledge of the site, making provision of adequate information and interpretation particularly vital. There has also been an increased interest and awareness of world heritage sites and easier access to them is now available through low cost air travel. This has led to an increase in visitor numbers, many of them mature and experienced consumers of heritage tourism products which, in turn, has led to requirements for facilities and interpretation becoming steadily more sophisticated. World heritage sites do not always include buildings and there can be significant environmental considerations. Stonehenge, for example, is one of the oldest cultural sites in the UK and is also one of the most controversial. The site is in the middle of Salisbury Plain, surrounded by roads with severe traffic problems. Visitor facilities are inadequate and over the past twenty years various plans have been produced to improve the quality of the visitor experience and to present the monument within its proper context.

4. VALUE OF HISTORIC PLACES

Historic buildings and sites have intrinsic value as part of the nation’s culture and heritage, moreover the historic environment offers a range of other benefits in areas such as education, regeneration and tourism. The Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IHBC) issued a statement in 2005 highlighting the wide ranging benefits that conservation delivers, particularly in terms of public policy objectives [7]. According to the IHBC, the historic environment underpins many successful projects that have improved quality of life, transformed deprived areas and have created a better and more sustainable environment. Clearly the statement is designed to generally promote the value of conservation
services and assist funding bids. As IHBC state, it is only through proper investment that these substantial benefits can continue to be realised.

One of the key duties of English Heritage as set out in the National Heritage Act of 1983 is ‘to promote the public’s enjoyment of…..ancient monuments and historic buildings’. In practice this means providing public access to properties in its care and promoting them as ‘visitor attractions’. English Heritage has made significant investment in visitor infrastructure in the past five years and many changes have been made in the approach to providing new facilities, partly in response to the increasing expectations of visitors as ‘customers’. Under the former care of the Ministry of Works the philosophy towards historic properties under their care militated against any structural additions and any modern addition had to show a clear delineation between it and the historic fabric. As a consequence the proliferation of new ticket offices and visitor shops, particularly through the 1960s and 1970s were very much of their time in both design and material selection and have dated quickly. Today there is a broader consideration of significance of English Heritage properties and the approach to modern interventions more sensitive to meeting visitor needs.

The National Trust is one of the largest landowners in the UK responsible for the upkeep of over 350 historic buildings and structures. In the early years of the National Trust the value of these properties was not fully appreciated and there were very few facilities for visitors. Where facilities did exist these were basic in nature: a small car park; toilets and perhaps a small room within the building for serving tea and selling guidebooks. This may have been sufficient for the low number of visitors but, as we have come to value historic sites more and the membership of the Trust has grown, reaching 3.5 million in 2007, so the number of paying visitors has grown exponentially reaching 14 million in the same year [8].

With the large increase in visitor numbers the facilities to service them became inadequate for many properties with over-crowding, increased fire risks and other environmental hazards to fragile historic buildings. Where suitable outbuildings were not available to convert into new visitor facilities it became necessary to create new buildings. The attitudes the National Trust has to the conservation of the sites in its ownership has shifted from the notion of promoting their ‘permanent preservation’ as enshrined in the 1907 Act establishing the Trust to a definition of conservation as:

‘…the careful management of change. It is about revealing and sharing the significance of places and ensuring that their special qualities are protected, enhanced, understood and enjoyed by present and future generations.’

Visitor management is critical to the success of a heritage site. Shackley [9] believes the ultimate aim for the manager of heritage visitor is to ensure an ‘effective service delivery, which creates a high quality visitor experience’. Discussing visitors as ‘customers’ may be uncomfortable for many heritage managers who may see the quality of visitor experience as secondary to the preservation of the site or historic property.

**Interpretation and the role of the visitor centre**

The historic sites subcommittee of the American Association of Museums defined interpretation as ‘a planned effort to create for the visitor an understanding of the history and significance of events, people and objects with which the site is associated’ [10]. Freeman Tilden [11], the pioneering author of Interpreting Our Heritage, defined it as ‘an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through use of original objects, by first hand experience and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information’. From both these definitions it is apparent that understanding the meanings and relationships of a given site is more important than simply digesting factual information. Visitor understanding of the important meanings and relationships depends on the programme of planned activities that may include oral, verbal and audiovisual commentary received from interpretation staff but also a variety of sensory and intellectual perceptions gathered from the quality of conservation and restoration or the effectiveness of the exhibits. Goulding [12] warns of the dangers of ‘over-interpretation’ which could lead to impairment of the visitors’ enjoyment of the historic site.

**5. ARCHITECTURAL LANGUAGE**

The design of a new visitor or interpretation centre on a sensitive site can take one of several forms. The approach of ‘hide-it and pretend-it-does-not-exist’ might be considered to be the most discrete
and appropriate solution as it does not compete with the setting it is meant to serve. Many visitor centres, however, are located at or near a site entrance and often function as the first point of entry for the visitor. A design that attempts to blend with its surroundings through the use of a facsimile of the local vernacular is a form of architectural deception, a pastiche, which might be considered disingenuous. An overtly modern design, by its contrasting forms and different materials, may appear alien and at conflict with its setting. Hall [13] observes that concerns about the effects and impacts that modern development can have on its surroundings are not new. According to Peter Stewart, the former Director of the Design Review Panel at CABE, Hall records it is often a lack of consensus about what is appropriate for a particular context that leads to the architecture of the lowest common denominator.

To produce a bland, inoffensive building is easier than designing a braver alternative of a stridently modern design. Uncompromising modern design often causes controversy whether it is on a sensitive historic site or not. Some dramatic examples of modern building inserted into historic sites can be found but rarely in the UK. This says much about patronage and public sensibilities in this country about our treatment of historic sites, attitudes to conservation and modern architecture generally.

Carlo Scarpa’s interventionist remodeling of Castelvecchio in Verona is a notable example of architectural embellishment of an historic site that goes beyond merely an act of architectural preservation. In the work undertaken between 1958 and 1964 to this fourteenth century castle, Scarpa was providing not only a rehabilitation of the castle but also an interpretation of its complicated history [14]. His skills in threading new work into the fabric of old building is obvious to see, producing an expressive form of architecture that is almost theatrical.

It is a widely held view that Castelvecchio’s significance is more to do with its history than the historic architecture of the castle itself. Interestingly, Coombs [15], after visiting Castelvecchio, was led to question the widely held conservationist assumption that ‘architectural preservation should take precedence over consideration of the social or political history of a place’. Scarpa’s design has certainly made a mark on the site and, ironically, over forty years later his work appears to have achieved a level of respect that is greater than that given to the original historic fabric. It is doubtful such dramatic intervention would be so successfully received in historic buildings of greater intrinsic value and architectural merit.

The architectural approach to new buildings at English Heritage properties is difficult to categorise as they no longer have rigid policy or rules but rather underlying principles that seek to achieve consistency in terms of presentation standards and quality of design and materials whilst respecting the individual characteristics of each site. English Heritage is clear however that new buildings should not compete with the historic structure it presents and there is preference for designs that will not quickly become ‘architecturally outmoded’. Sarah Staniforth, Historic Properties Director for the National Trust, acknowledges that design and location of new visitor buildings in the early 1970s was informed by the conservation thinking of the time, particularly the Venice Charter. The two most influential Articles from the Charter are considered to be Article 12: ‘Replacement of missing parts must integrate harmoniously with the whole, but at the same time must be distinguishable from the original so that restoration does not falsify the artistic or historic evidence’ and Article 13: ‘additions cannot be allowed except so far as they do not detract from the interesting parts of the building, its traditional setting, the balance of its composition and its relation with its surroundings’.

This thinking was reflected in the modernist buildings created of a form that is obviously distinct from the neighbouring historic building and located well away from the centre of the site. Philip Jebb’s design (1972) for a visitor centre at Chartwell is typical of this period clearly illustrating the Venice Charter principles with a flat-roofed, low-cost building sited at some distance from the house and gardens. By the late 1970s, however, there was a shift in attitude towards use of traditional materials and building forms. For the National Trust, the design of the visitor centre at Fountains Abbey by Ted Cullinan in 1992 marked a turning point. The building is a large complex housing a range of functions from reception and shop to restaurant, exhibition and conference facility. The architectural character was unquestionably modern but made references to the vernacular through use of traditional local materials such as drystone walling and stone slates. By the mid 1990s the National Trust were debating whether visitor centres were becoming too large and too much of an attraction in their own right. Out of these discussions some general principles were set down. Among these was the principle that visitor facilities should help achieve management objectives in practical ways in addition to making a positive contribution to visitors’ enjoyment, understanding and appreciation of an historic site. Specifically, it was felt that the visitor route should not be taken through the shop or restaurant. These facilities should be visible but not obtrusive. A preference was also expressed for new buildings
to house visitor facilities in individual buildings rather than under one large roof to avoid the potential of a large building dominating a site.

6. WELSH CONTEXT

Most heritage sites in Wales are under the management of Cadw, an agency of the Welsh Assembly Government. Cadw was created in 1984 and became part of the devolved government in 2005. The agency is responsible for promoting the conservation of Wales’ historic environment and gives advice for conserving and maintaining the historic environment. Cadw is also responsible for managing over 125 historic sites in Wales and part of their remit is to encourage community engagement and improve access to sites in their care.

A number of new visitor centres have been built in Wales in recent years. Several of these make an important contribution to the debate on the role of a new building in a sensitive historic setting. At Caerphilly Castle, Sutton Davies Architects have provided a dramatic solution to placing a new building in the grounds of scheduled ancient monument. The heavy oak-framed structure contrasts sharply with the massive stone walls of the castle although the architects point to the past as inspiration as the castle would have contained a number of timber structures in the form of small buildings, fighting platforms and lean-to roofs [16]. Timber from locally managed sources, solar energy collected via the south facing glazed walls and underfloor heating operated from a heat pump connected to the moat indicate the sustainable credentials of this design.

A new visitor and interpretation centre has recently opened in Cardiff Castle after several years in development. The design of this £8m building designed by Niall Phillips is relatively unimposing being built into the back of the perimeter wall adjacent to the main entrance and partly roofed in grass to blend it with the surrounding landscape. Under the ownership of Cardiff City Council, this building is a scaled down scheme from that originally thrown out by Cadw and the planning inspector in 2003. The unpreproposing style of the new building is a little at odds with its surroundings given the history of the castle under the Bute family and that much of what stands today is nineteenth century re-interpretation akin to the romantic re-construction of James Wyatt and others in the eighteenth century so despised by early conservationists. Niall Phillips is also the architect of the new visitor centre at Blaenavon World Heritage site. This is the first dedicated World Heritage centre in the UK and it comprises two listed buildings, Grade II* and Grade II, which were originally St Peter’s School, linked by a modern steel and glass structure. The centre has two main aims: firstly, to promote awareness of World Heritage sites and their ‘outstanding universal value’ and secondly, to provide a focus for ‘actual and intellectual access’ to the site.

Cadw have sought to incorporate new technologies into redevelopments of their visitor facilities. At the new Raglan Castle visitor centre, designed by Sutton Davies Architecture, a pilot project using Bluetooth technology to deliver audio files to visitors’ mobile phones is currently underway. Visitors can download MP3 audio stories onto their mobile phones for free. The stories, which take visitors on a guided tour of the castle, recount life at the castle during the Civil War siege of 1646. The expectation is that the stories will encourage visitors to explore the castle’s history further through other on-site interpretation, events and guidebooks.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this paper was to review the development and impact of visitor centres on sites of historic and cultural significance. The growth of the heritage tourism industry is providing challenges for those responsible for managing and protecting our historic sites. Increasing visitor numbers are being actively encouraged by English Heritage, Cadw, National Trust and other agencies as the income stream from paying visitors forms an important source of revenue that is needed to support the running and maintenance costs associated with heritage sites and historic buildings.

With the growth of visitor numbers and their increasing expectations for better service facilities comes the problem for those involved in the management of heritage sites. A fine balance has to be maintained between protecting the historic and cultural values of a site whilst managing large numbers of visitors and servicing their needs and demands. Provision of interpretation facilities enhances the visitor experience and many sites are employing a range of techniques such as audio visual technology. Further research into the delivery of interpretation using new technologies is required to consider use of virtual reality and augmented reality and how the use of such technology could impact on the design of new visitor centres. The consideration of the architectural form of visitor centres provides a useful understanding of the approaches adopted by the agencies responsible for the care
of our historic and cultural sites towards new building interventions. Current policy on new buildings in historic sites is still based largely on SPAB principles of minimum intervention, honesty and respect for the past. Further investigation into architectural philosophy in relation to historic sites would be a useful contribution to a wider debate about society’s attitude towards such sites and whether new architecture can ever be used to intervene or embellish them.

8. REFERENCES

[14] Murphy, R (1990), Carlo Scarpa and the Castelvecchio, London; Butterworth Architecture