

Interpretation

A Road to Creative Enlightenment

Paul H. Risk

Properties listed in the National Register of Historic Places represent significant contributions to our nation's cultural heritage. These resources and the documentation accompanying them should be put to a suitable educational use. For local, regional, state, and federal organizations interested in designing interpretive programs for public instruction, recreation, and tourism, the National Register is an excellent place to start.

What is Interpretation?

Freeman Tilden defined interpretation as:

*"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."*¹

To Tilden's statement the author would like to suggest that interpretation is also:

The translation of the technical or unfamiliar language of the environment into lay language, with no loss in accuracy, in order to create and enhance sensitivity, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and commitment.

The final five words comprise the "Sensitivity Continuum," a sequence through which a visitor passes if interpretation is successful and will be discussed later.

Why Interpret?

We in developed countries suffer from extreme urbanization which causes tunnel vision and severely limits



Obvious historic resources may be readily identified and interpreted, as is a section of the Oregon Trail near Guernsey, WY. Photo by Stephen Lissandro.

our ability to appreciate our relationship to the environment, past or present. This is particularly true with historical events, experiences, and perspective. We live in a selective and distorted pseudoreality. Interpretation can bridge the gap of time, provide personal relevance, and open our perspective regarding things otherwise shadowed and obscure.

Cultural interpretation can provide a sense of regional and heritage pride which will enhance citizen concern, protection and preservation of resources, and give a sense of geographic awareness. Environmental, geographic, and historical understanding help us all become wholly integrated with the past, the present, and the future and it may be hoped, lessen the likelihood of remaking historic mistakes.

Learning From the Past

From the past we can learn, among other things, that our ancestors did some things better than we. Coping may be one example. From the vantage point of a climate-controlled automobile racing smoothly along the interstate at 70 miles an hour, it is hard to imagine traveling the same route more than a hundred years earlier in a covered wagon. Once such a vision becomes clear in our minds, the trauma of a flat tire and the resulting wait for a tow truck will never again compare with the experiences of freezing and starving people on the Mormon Trail pushing and pulling handcarts miles and miles, day after day, week after week.

Our ancestors had a hands-on understanding of cause and effect which we have lost. Unlike our sanitized experiences selecting plastic wrapped meat or produce at the local supermarket, they knew that whenever they ate, something died; whether plant or animal. They understood that one must cut a tree to have a house and that the leather for their boots, shoes, and belts required the sacrifice of a steer.

Interpretation as an Aid to Protection and Preservation

We protect what we understand and value. When feelings of stewardship evolve, vandalism is reduced. As mentioned earlier, an important goal of interpretation is to create or enhance public sensitivity, awareness, understanding, appreciation, and commitment.

When we are insensitive, a condition often resulting from lack of experience or failure to sense personal relevance, we fail to perceive—to be fully aware of the components of our surroundings. However, it is possible to be aware of a cultural event or historic artifact and yet not understand its context or significance—a situation which may breed indifference or apprehension.

Of the two, indifference may be the most dangerous. An indifferent person either assigns no value or devalues an object or event for which they have no feeling. It is far easier to damage or destroy an object when it is considered unimportant. This is particularly true when "old, useless" buildings are cal-

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lously bulldozed to unthinkingly make room for “progress.”

Once understanding has been established, effective interpretation is intended to move the visitor from understanding, an intellectual exercise, to appreciation, a mental process closely tied to emotions. Appreciation engenders value assignment and values are not necessarily rational. They are, however, critical to effective interpretation. It is the author’s strong belief that any interpretation which does not touch the human emotions will fail to be totally effective.

Finally, the last stage in the Sensitivity Continuum is commitment which comes when the visitor finds internal prompting causing them to take actions they would not have taken without interpretation. For example, when they actively help protect the object of interpretation. In other words, the goal of interpretation is a change in behavior of those for whom we interpret.

Communities interested in designing architectural, historical, or cultural interpretive programs should consider the properties listed in the National Register. National Register properties are well suited to be the core of heritage interpretation because they represent a wide array of architectural building types and styles, historical themes and events, and diverse cultural associations. However, National Register status and value often goes unnoticed in the daily lives of local residents. Interpretation can bring to life the stories of these properties and begin the Sensitivity Continuum. The successful interpretation of cultural resources requires involvement of government agencies, industries, service clubs, special interest groups, youth groups and educational institutions, among others. The keys are coordination and correlation.

The nature and location of National Register properties will define the interpretive activities and determine how they will be tailored to travelers in cars, on bikes, in water craft, and on foot. Both traditional and non-traditional interpretive approaches should be applied to these resources. Wayside exhibits and historical markers assist

motorists traveling along highways to understand the history of the areas they pass through. Cassette tours, radio message repeaters, and guided walking tours may be appropriate for interpreting National Register historic districts. Trail markers and cassette tours may be the answer for a series of historic resources along a linear route, such as railroad roadbeds, where cyclists and hikers are the predominant trail users. Published brochures are traditional sources of interpretive information.

Ambitious interpretive projects can cover a large geographical area. In such cases, preservationists may consider thematic interpretive “safaris.” Recently a group of Wyoming educators participated in a trek that traveled a 75-mile section of the Oregon Trail in wagons to learn first hand of the rigors of such ventures. “In-home” tours on laser disks, interactive video, ordinary video tapes, and interactive multimedia computer games and simulations offer those who cannot participate in the above activities a means for innovative learning and recreation.

For those of us responsible for perpetuating cultural viability and protection for future generations, interpretation must never be considered a frill. It is vital. It must be of the highest quality possible, innovatively carried out. Interpretation, if done well, can be a profound experience for visitors as well as local residents. We owe it our best efforts.

Notes

¹ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 8.

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