HERITAGE DESIGN – ASPIRATION AND REDEMPTION

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(This is the report on our previously noted visit – [Link])

Bianca Carpeneti and Michael Shanks visiting Alan Campbell MP at the House of Commons

Our current work on the archaeological project at Binchester UK includes a major focus on cultural resource management (CRM), as it gets called in the US. We've spent a great deal of time visiting people and sites around the Northeast in an effort to get a sense of the region and how it handles a landscape that is so saturated with historical and cultural sites. We welcome local volunteers (our key

partner, Durham County Council, receives a grant for this from English Heritage). Our project is also somewhat unusual in that it is a research excavation (rather than prompted by real estate development), and serves as a summer school, while also explicitly aiming to develop cultural facilities (visitor access to the Roman past) in an economically depressed region. We are particularly interested in how an area – be it town, county, or region – incorporates stakeholder communities into this management process. We're very much aware of recent moves in the world of heritage management, such as the Faro Convention (Council of Europe 2005) (see the entries last year in this blog [Link] and [Link]), that are shifting attention to sharing and disseminating cultural assets, as much as protecting and preserving tangible and intangible heritage. We want to explore how these changing attitudes play out in practice.

In pursuit of that, we went to London to meet with Alan Campbell MP for lunch in the House of Commons. As a member of the last Labour UK Government, a leading political representative in the north east of England, and a historian, Alan offered a valuable perspective on our research. Our discussion focused on local and regional identity, culture and economic development in the region. In particular, we were concerned with how these topics inform our excavation at Binchester and our archaeological survey of the Roman borders.

As we see it, CRM is fundamentally about the relation of economic interest to personal experience – the shape of people's experiences, stories of people's lives, how and what sources and records are acquired, what is made of these records. We believe these things direct an individual's cultural values. Ultimately, we must ask: where are these different cultural values taking us?

We took up the topic of cultural value and put it to Campbell – what role for history and archaeology in regional development, in a region like the north east of England? To frame our discussion, it is worth highlighting several of the notable movements in the world of CRM, especially in the Northeast.

The likes of John Schofield, our colleague at the University of York and latterly with English Heritage, the government agency responsible for archaeology in the UK, have stressed the connections between heritage and tourism. Tourism is a service sector that contributes about £7.5 billion to the UK's GDP (contrast the motor industry – £5.5 billion). Heritage is here quite an asset. We might aim to make

Binchester a tourist honey-pot, along the lines, perhaps, of Vindolanda to the north. John also points to a more dynamic notion of heritage that we very much support.

The Faro Convention places a premium on heritage as cultural action, that is, how heritage is best utilized in a variety of contexts, from vocational training to local planning and sustainable management of the environment. Moreover, cultural enrichment is proposed to go hand in hand with economic development. This notion and its implications should not be overlooked; cultural enrichment is not an incidental by-product but a catalyst for economic progress. That said, we must also be realistic about the challenges facing such proposals. Below, we outline some of the most pressing ones.

We discussed two major impediments to the UK even signing the convention, never mind implementing its recommendations. The first is the significant opposition, particularly on the political right, to seeing the UK as part of a European cultural landscape in the first place; and notions of UK national sovereignty and identity are invoked against policies coming from European agencies.

One of the most significant challenges to initiatives like Faro, though, is the current economic downturn that so many institutions (public and private) are struggling with. When push comes to shove, it is much easier to cut spending for a visitor center than a nursery school. As a result, regional development agencies are being abolished and instead regional development in the UK is now being focused on public-business partnerships. This throws into sharper focus the choice: just who is going to pay for a new story of the Roman north? Different values indeed.

Alan particularly raised the question of how regions are changing in the UK as well as in Europe (typically taken as a continent of regions that don’t neatly fit into nation states). The Northeast is one of the few distinctive regions left in the UK, given social mobility, a post-industrial economy centered on financial services in the south east of England, and globalization. But just what is an authentic north east regional identity? Is it knowing the song “The Blaydon Races”, or cherishing stories of Roman frontiers, border reivers, and latter-day north eastern industrialists like the Stevensons and Armstrong? Alan rightly, in our view, questions aspects of “Geordie” identity, many of which can be argued as being quite artificial eighteenth and nineteenth century inventions (Hobsbawn and Ranger’s

classic work “The Invention of Tradition” is very pertinent here [Link]), or connected with broader global historical trends, particularly industrialization. He is much more concerned to look beyond regionality to more fluid articulations that lie at the heart of identity politics. We like this.

Alan pointed to the crucial changes in class culture over the last 40 years that informed, for example, the rise of New Labour in the 1990s. The occupational class communities that lay behind the political parties of most of the twentieth century have dissipated. New Labour shifted attention from old and static notions of identity (shipbuilding = industrial working class = Labour) to aspiration – you could still be Labour while aspiring to achieve what were traditionally seen as middle class and even conservative ambitions and values. The promise was to give people the space to shape their own identities, freeing values from inherited ideologies, looking forwards not backwards, harnessing identity (class membership, political affiliation) to hope and improvement.

Crucial changes might well be echoed in areas besides class culture. The old extractive and manufacturing industries of the north east, which gave the region so much of its character, have gone. Alan’s constituency is North Shields, home to some of the great shipyards of the River Tyne. Shouldn’t a government contract for a new Royal Navy carrier come to the Tyne? But we live in a post-industrial world of a knowledge and experience economy. Ships are not just welded steel and great engines. It would make more economic sense to build the actual hull somewhere cheaper and instead have the IT systems, that are now the core of the military, designed and built in the UK. This requires fostering links between knowledge institutions like universities with business corporations as well as government agencies. A knowledge economy begs the question of the role of knowledge/research institutions and suggests attention to the transfer of knowledge.

Is there any room in this scenario for archaeological and historical heritage? Not as long as we continue to design and think of cultural projects in subject specific terms. Instead, we need to re-think the way that CRM happens and design projects that are more intimately tied to such broader trends, as Faro actually suggests.

A successful knowledge economy is tied to innovation and creativity. The related shift to delivering not products but experiences, in what Joe Pine first called our experience economy [Link], throws emphasis upon how people desire rich cultural

experiences and will choose one product over another on that basis. Innovation, creativity, rich human experiences are rooted in certain kinds of environments or, more accurately, cultural ecologies. Some cities, for example, have long offered such a cosmopolitan milieu that fosters innovation through vivid cultural experiences and opportunities.

Creating such rich environments is the work of the urban planner and designer (see the recent entry on the City and Port of Rotterdam – [Link]). History and heritage, as well as research and educational institutions, are crucial components, as is widely acknowledged. Introduce a dynamic notion of identity, such as we have sketched, and there emerge some fresh suggestions for archaeological projects such as ours.

Let’s work through an example.

We give support at Binchester to a very active reenactment community – enthusiasts who, on their weekends, dress and act like Romans. Most are very concerned about accuracy and authenticity: they have just the right gear. The narrative frame for their performance is typically the old one of empire and military occupation – Roman soldiers and attendant communities at the frontier. In spite of the authenticity of the reenactment (accurate details of dress and accoutrement), what we often witness is, arguably, a misinterpretation of life in the Roman north, a misunderstanding of the military in antiquity. Certainly the likes of Richard Hingley (one of our Principal Investigators at Binchester) and David Mattingley are questioning the nature of the Roman empire. Richard has headed a project, *Tales of the Frontier* [Link], that explicitly aimed to share this reevaluation. Michael is writing a text book with Gary (Devore, another Binchester PI), presenting a new model of the ancient political community. We see Binchester as part of such a reevaluation.

We really need to ask – What has any story of Roman times got to do with (regional) identity in the Northeast? This question opens up many possible avenues, given that people construct identity within such a wide and varied network of encounters: as they actually experience themselves, their memories and identities, their commitment to local life, their sense of prosperity, or not. How do such stories enrich the local cultural ecology, in the sense above?

Icons of identity? Romans in the north (?) and the Durham Miners’ Gala (2010) – [Link]

Bianca is suspicious of focusing our heritage work on the presentation of collections of artifacts, with attendant stock narratives, shoehorning people into stories of “the way things were”, as authorized by academic authorities. If we connect identity to aspiration, and not “the way things were”, we should establish what people’s aspirations are and offer history and archaeology that informs and enriches the future. Telling the story of Binchester begins and ends with contemporary people.

This is precisely a political process of representing a constituency. Listening – so that our academic expertise in working on the evidence of past lives speaks to people now. More than listening – we are putting the case for deep ethnography of an archaeological project, locating it within its contemporary cultural landscape. And acting – delivering cultural goods fitted to enrich people’s experiences.

This is just that kind of process of human-centered design promoted by this blog [Link – see the category design matters]. We suggest that seeing archaeological heritage management as a design process gives actionable form to the growing

acknowledgement that community involvement and the consultation of stakeholder interests are central to heritage management.

The past is only vital when future oriented. And, symmetrically, the past is the basis of vital innovation, creativity and cultural prosperity. We should see archaeological sites and collections less as objects of stewardship, subject to protection and conservation, and more as cultural infrastructures – places, resources, facilities that foster creativity and innovation, because they help orient our aspirations and hopes for the future.

The Victoria and Albert Museum in London was established to inspire industrial design. In our Revs Program at Stanford [Link] and [Link] we aim, within the context of our engineering and design schools, to create a car museum that is simultaneously a design studio. This is how disciplines like history and archaeology can connect with a knowledge and experience economy – the academy as a studio for human centered design, and where the human necessarily involves the academic Humanities and Arts.

Textures of everyday life? An interior at Beamish Museum of the Living North [Link]
[Link]

Thus far, our exploration of the northeast continues to affirm the idea that it is the “human-centered”-ness, the humanity of the past that makes it resonate today. The reenacting Romans we met this year at Binchester were actually more interested in the *textures of everyday life* than in an historical narrative of conquest and occupation. They were humorous and very human, rather than historical, in their performances. At Beamish, the Living Museum of the North [Link], there is little reference to chronology or historical drama in a visit to its reconstructed farms and town from the last couple of centuries; instead there is a very poignant and human experience of lifeways and quotidian texture now lost and gone. Andrew Birley, heading the excavations at Vindolanda [Link], has focused the new site museum less on the history of the Romans in the north, and more on just these kinds of texture. Because this is the humanity of the past that connects and enriches our appreciation of what we have, what we have lost, and what we stand to gain.

Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer put it well in Dialectic of Enlightenment (1941), their diatribe against the rationalizations of modernity and the coming horrors of European world war:

> What is needed is not the preservation of the past, but the redemption of past hopes.