

CONSIDERATION OF HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY IN HERITAGE TOURISM PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract.— A review of heritage tourism literature reveals a fundamental tension over the use, function, and degree of authenticity of historic resources used for tourism development. Using a case study approach, this paper explores how stakeholder beliefs regarding historical authenticity influence the heritage tourism products, services, and experiences created for visitors and the value of historical authenticity to community stakeholders relative to other factors involved with heritage tourism development. Heritage tourism stakeholders in Manistee and Ludington, Michigan consider historic preservation and historical authenticity to be important components of heritage tourism development; however, other factors, such as providing an engaging and entertaining experience, have resulted in the creation of inauthentic contexts, stories, and experiences at some sites. Enhanced development of interpretive services is suggested as a way to preserve authenticity while also providing a more engaging experience.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Recognizing the current and potential economic benefits of tourism, both heritage resource managers and economic development professionals have advocated collaborative partnerships to develop historic resources for heritage tourism. Despite the intent to work together, philosophical tensions regarding the nature and function of historic resources have hampered collaboration. There is evidence in the

heritage tourism literature of a fundamental tension over the use, function, and authenticity of historic resources; this tension is especially evident regarding the use of historic resources as a commodity within the tourism industry (Ashworth, 1994; Garrod & Fyall, 2000; McKercher & du Cros, 2002). By using history to create experiences for tourists, the history of a site can be altered and, in some cases, recreated into something completely false (Cohen, 1988; Herbert, 1995).

1.1 Defining History and Authenticity

During the past century, there have been changes in methods of historical research, and some have questioned the motivation and purpose for history to be written at all. The notion of objective truth or reality has been challenged by the idea that historians, and the sources of historical information with which they work, have inherent biases that influence what can be known about the past. Despite claims to objectivity, the previous domination of historical narratives from a white, male, heroic perspective is seen to have served more as a nation-building, identity-creating or status quo-preserving device than as an objective source of information about how things occurred in the past (Loewen, 1995; Lowenthal, 1998). As a result, considerable effort has been made by historians under the social constructivist philosophy to study less powerful, disadvantaged, and exploited members and groups within society (Iggers, 1997). This definitional and conceptual debate also presents a quandary for heritage tourism planners and developers: Which resources, stories, events, and perspectives accurately present a community's history and associated culture? Which should be developed and presented to tourists?

Heritage resource organizations that have advocated partnerships with heritage tourism have been explicit in their calls for authenticity. The National Trust for Historic Preservation (Green, 1993), for example,

cites authenticity as a way to promote the *true story* of an area by giving the destination *real value* and *appeal*. While she does not explicitly define authenticity, Hargrove (1999, 2002) describes it in terms of objective truth, a *significant* or *distinctive* asset, something *real* and *tangible* that visitors can experience and that is supported by *historical fact*. Visitors to heritage sites across the United States, she argues, have come to value and expect authenticity as part of a meaningful, quality educational experience. In calling for a focus on authenticity, McKercher and du Cros (2002) clarify this point by saying, “the days have well and truly passed where low-quality experiences can satisfy the gullible tourist” (p.127).

Within the context of heritage tourism, Wang (1999) provides an important differentiation between the competing definitions of authenticity. Authenticity in tourism can be applied to both the visitor experience (activity-related authenticity) and the toured objects themselves (object-related authenticity). Where Wang’s existential definition of authenticity deals with the activities or experience of the visitor, both objective and constructive definitions of authenticity focus more on objects, or the heritage tourism product that has been developed. Because the goal of this study is to better understand the role of authenticity in the heritage tourism development process (creating objects or products for consumption), Wang’s objective and constructive definitions of object-related authenticity are used as the basis for exploring stakeholder beliefs and opinions.

1.2 Heritage Tourism and Authenticity

While historians are becoming more apt to recognize the limits of objective truth in their field, some are nonetheless critical of the heritage industry as presenting false and untrue stories. “Heritage,” argues Lowenthal (1998), which is based more on faith than on fact, “passes on exclusive myths of origin and continuance, endowing a select group with prestige and common purpose” (p. 128). Ashworth (1994) suggests that this is the result of a selective process between competing messages. The end result of this process, he argues, is a heritage product that

has a meaning specific only to its intended audience and separate from its actual, tangible artifacts. This meaning can be manipulated in endless ways to cater to any potential audience, turning history into a commodity rather than a source of objective truth. In this sense, generating revenue and providing entertainment value could be considered more important than accurately representing history in its authentic context.

Several studies have shown a link between planning decisions and a lack of authenticity in the heritage tourism products and experiences created for visitors. Tilley (1997) showed how the Wala Island Tourist Resort in Malekula, Vanuatu (located off the coast of Australia), selectively chose portions of the historical record that would best attract their target market tourists from neighboring islands. Similarly, Waitt (2000) described how deliberate decisions were made by heritage tourism developers in Sydney, Australia, to select parts of the historical record that would avoid issues of conflict, oppression, and racism that were authentic to the area in order to attract a certain type of tourist. Barthel-Bouchier (2001) also described how the Amana Colonies (Iowa, U.S.) deliberately ignored authentic aspects of their history, as well as recommendations of historic preservationists, to develop a commercialized ‘German’ product to attract more tourists rather than tell the authentic story of their culture.

2.0 PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purposes of this study are: 1) to explore how stakeholder beliefs regarding historical authenticity influence heritage tourism products, services and experiences created for visitors; and 2) to explore the value of historical authenticity relative to other factors involved with heritage tourism planning and development. The following major questions guided the research:

- How is heritage tourism represented in the communities and how do stakeholders define historical authenticity?
- Do stakeholders use objective reality to help shape heritage tourism products, or is history

considered a commodity that is molded to fit their target audiences?

- Is authenticity a lower priority than attracting visitors, generating revenue, or providing an entertaining experience?

3.0 RESEARCH METHODS

Following expert consultation with Bill Anderson, Director of the Michigan Department of History, Arts and Libraries (HAL), the Michigan communities of Manistee and Ludington (see Fig. 1) were selected as case study sites for this research. Manistee and Ludington were part of the HAL Cultural Tourism Visitor Experience Pilot Project because of their demonstrated commitment to creative partnerships for developing historic resources by both heritage resource managers and economic development professionals. Manistee and Ludington are independent communities, but they have used similar economic development strategies through heritage tourism. They are examined in this research as a single case because they function as a single collaborative entity for regional product development and promotion in the HAL Pilot Project.

The primary sources of data for this case study were 13 individual in-depth interviews with stakeholders involved in the heritage tourism development process, including six heritage resource managers, five economic development professionals and two other participants identified through a snowball sampling technique. This was supplemented by a document review, including primary and secondary sources of historical information, planning documents, marketing and promotional materials and other relevant secondary sources such as newspapers, magazines and electronic media. In addition, tour guide training manuals, historical markers, and exhibit texts were documented by the researcher to assess the existing heritage tourism landscape and provide context for the comments of the interviewees.

Interviews were audio recorded using a tape recorder and then transcribed by the researcher for later analysis. Three hundred seven images of historical markers and exhibit text were also transcribed, along



Figure 1.—Location of case studies.

with marketing and promotional materials. Analysis primarily involved thematic text analysis using text coding as described by Crabtree and Miller (1992), with the goal of organizing the large volume of text from the interviews into categories of meaning.

4.0 RESULTS FROM PRIMARY DATA

Interview participants primarily defined historical authenticity as objective reality, emphasizing the importance of original buildings, historic homes, and tangible artifacts. The sights, smells, and sounds of a cruise aboard the Lake Michigan carferry *S.S. Badger* or the Victorian flair of the National Register Historic District in downtown Manistee are examples of this objective definition. The perception of historical authenticity as objective reality is related to an overall appreciation for historic resources among participants, an appreciation that puts value on preservation and restoration efforts. In the case of the Ramsdell Theater in Manistee, for example, the intangible benefits of preserving the theater outweighed the economic costs of the project. “There is absolutely no way that the Ramsdell Theater, by virtue of the improvements that

we have made, will ever have an increase in revenue to compensate for the dollars being dumped in,” explained one participant, “but it was important to this community that that theater be preserved.”

While interview participants felt that historical authenticity was important, there were limits to its importance when considered against other factors such as providing a fun and engaging visitor experience. More than half of the interview participants mentioned the importance of the visitor experience when developing heritage tourism products, illustrating the struggle to balance authenticity as objective reality with the need to create revenue-generating experiences for tourists. “It’s not like a history class,” explained one participant. “People are there to be entertained; they are there for an experience.” While some participants did state that embellishing stories to create an engaging context was acceptable, inappropriately altering a building to improve the visitor experience was not. “We’re willing to make some changes as long as it doesn’t affect the character of the building,” explained one participant. “In other words, we don’t want to destroy one of the staircases – the main staircases – to put in an elevator because it’s one of the key design elements of the building.”

4.1 Collaborative Process

Heritage tourism development began in Manistee with the Uniqueness Committee, an arm of the Manistee Chamber of Commerce, that coordinated efforts between community members, civic organizations, museum members, and local churches to identify, promote, and preserve Manistee’s historic resources. Beginning during an economic downturn in the 1980s, the Uniqueness Committee helped to integrate historic preservation efforts with tourism as part of an alternative economic development strategy. One outgrowth of these efforts is an annual preservation recognition award given to local homeowners in the Manistee historic district. The city of Manistee also has chosen to refurbish existing government buildings, such as the firehouse and city hall, rather than tear them down to build new ones. This preservation ethic was apparent among participants, and is likely a

direct outgrowth of the successful early efforts of the Uniqueness Committee.

Mutual respect for the skills, priorities, and perspectives of the two primary stakeholder groups represented in this study – heritage resource managers and economic development professionals – is evident in study results. Economic development professionals believe in the value and importance of historians and other experts in the heritage tourism development process, and heritage resource managers demonstrate a clear understanding of the fiscal realities of their organizations within the heritage tourism landscape. Therefore, in the case of Manistee and Ludington, the relationship between heritage resource managers and economic development professionals appears less adverse than in other cases described in the literature.

4.2 The Visitor Experience

Although this research did not assess the experiences of visitors from their point of view, study participants expressed clear views on the importance of creating an engaging visitor experience as part of the tourism development process. One participant shared ideas about a lumber museum concept in which visitors could experience walking on logs that simulated floating them down the Manistee River, or could breathe in the smells of a bunkhouse filled with sweaty lumberjacks. Some participant comments indicated a belief that authentic history was not fun or engaging and that some license was needed to make visitor experiences more desirable. “In order to attract people to the historical story being told, it has to be made as entertaining as possible,” explained one participant, “and that means there is certain embroidery that has to go on.” For example, examples of ghost stories were shared by stakeholders and several stories were told about the lunettes (architectural feature of a vaulted ceiling) in the lobby of the Ramsdell Theater that were not authentic, according to the local historians. At the same time, several participants implied that a fun and engaging experience was somehow different than an authentic one. “You need to engage them somehow,” explained one participant, “and sometimes you’re not going to engage them with the pure authentic form.”

The need for balance between authenticity and the visitor experience often resulted in compromise and was apparent in decisions made at individual heritage tourism sites. In the case of Manistee and Ludington, there was an appreciation for the physical remains of history that transcended the visitor experience. For example, putting in a larger bed and carpet in the captain's quarters of the *S.S. City of Milwaukee* would make overnight visitors more comfortable, but would not permanently alter the ship or run counter to its National Historic Landmark status. Therefore, such modifications were deemed reasonable and justified. On the other hand, modifications that destroy historic character or resources are considered inappropriate. As an example, ongoing restoration efforts at the First Congregational Church of Christ in Manistee are done in consultation with a historic preservation expert. Possible alterations are considered only if the initial design of the building is preserved. In this case, a suitable location had been found for a new elevator to provide improved access for all visitors to the magnificent view from the sanctuary's balcony.

5.0 RESULTS FROM SECONDARY DATA

Despite the coordinated regional efforts of Manistee and Ludington, more could be done to enhance the visitor experience through interpretive services. Some interpretive messages are outdated, and some interpretive signs present historical topics that are not promoted as they once were. Ludington is one of several communities to claim the "exact spot" where Father Jacques Marquette died in the 17th century. Despite recent publications on this topic by local authors, the Father Marquette story is not part of the current theme developed for tourists and is noticeably absent from current promotional materials, even though multiple sites were built in the 1950s to commemorate him. These sites and monuments are easily accessible by tourists, with one monument prominently displayed in the Ludington marina. The memorial erected in his honor has enduring qualities beyond the scope of tourism, so is justified in that way. However, when this and other older sites may be considered as tourism attractions,

challenges to presentation of authentic stories and images may become problematic. Some of the sites contain outdated and inaccurate messages, and some use language that could be considered offensive or politically incorrect to current audiences. As Loewen (1999) suggests, some of these historical markers and interpretive texts could either be re-interpreted in a modern context, or simply stored in a museum as part of the historical record.

There was also evidence of a lack of coordination between some entities and the region's coordinated heritage tourism development efforts. One of the local gift shops, for example, displays a unique set of murals covering the entire length of the store adjacent to the street. Despite their artistic merits, the murals depict scenes of the American West, including several of Native Americans that are not authentic to the eastern shore of Lake Michigan. As with outdated historical markers, these murals could have value in other contexts, but as tourist attractions attempting to portray an authentic image and story about the region's history, they fail. More coordination among planners, tourism businesses, and other stakeholders is needed to present authentic messages that would enhance local historic themes and topics identified as important to the development and portrayal of the region's heritage.

In some cases, interpretation at sites related to the developed topics and themes of the region simply doesn't exist. The Udell Rollways, for example, is a site where lumber was rolled several hundred feet and then into the Manistee River so it could be floated down river to the lumber mills. The location was promoted in the early 20th century as a picnic site and still provides a picnic pavilion today. However, there are no historical markers or interpretive services at the site, and the historic context of its original purpose would likely be missed by most visitors. Another site in a park south of Manistee contains two large rocks with the inscription "be kind to animals." According to a local historian, these used to contain water for horses and other small animals to drink. The park used to be the home of a gazebo and was a popular site for concerts, picnics and events during Manistee's early

history. Again, without interpretive signage, these facilities and historic events are easily lost among the modern playground equipment currently at the site.

6.0 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Manistee and Ludington were chosen as a case study for this research because of their history of collaborative heritage tourism development efforts among diverse stakeholders. This process began independently in the two cities and has grown into a collaborative regional effort. As stated above, the primary tension between authenticity and heritage tourism identified by participants is created as a result of wanting to provide a “fun and engaging visitor experience” and to enhance economic gain. Despite the desire among some participants to provide amusement park theatrics to visitors, significant progress could be made by more fully and appropriately developing interpretive services at heritage tourism sites.

The following improvements to interpretation could improve the visitor experience in Manistee and Ludington:

- More coordinated organization of themes around historical topics, at individual sites and especially between venues across the region
- Improved signage that links more clearly to the historical topics and developed themes of the region
- Guided experiences led by trained volunteers or Certified Interpretive Guides
- Development of multi-sensory, participatory visitor experiences.

In Manistee and Ludington, the tension between authenticity and other factors has resulted in compromise, but not at the cost of the physical historical remains in the region. Tangible, historical artifacts and buildings were identified as a primary link to the past by interview participants. Despite continued economic difficulties in the region, an ethic of historic preservation continues to thrive and is an integral part of the region’s heritage tourism and economic development decisionmaking.

In both cities there is evidence of both Wang’s (1999) objective and constructive definitions of authenticity. An emphasis on historic preservation and presentation of tangible, authentic artifacts to visitors demonstrate the objective realm, while creating stories and fabricating inauthentic contexts represent the constructive realm. As in other cases in the literature (Barthel-Bouchier, 2001; Tilley, 1997; Waitt, 2000), history has been developed as a commodity in what Lowenthal (1998, p.128) calls a “creative commingling of fact with fiction.”

Primarily defining authenticity as objective reality based on actual buildings and historical artifacts is a natural fit with historic preservation efforts. In the case of Manistee and Ludington, there seems to be a direct relationship between the success of historic preservation and heritage tourism development. At the same time, creating inaccurate stories could actually have negative impacts on the quality of the visitor experience and visitors’ perceptions of the heritage tourism venue (Hargrove, 1999; McKercher & Du Cros, 2002). Additional research should focus on the elements of a fun and engaging experience and the impact of embroidered or inaccurate stories on visitors’ perceptions of experience quality and value, and on their understanding of the region’s history.

7.0 CITATIONS

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