

Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation. Enchanting the Past-Future, by Russell Staiff
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Much of cultural heritage, at the physical level, is just brick, mortar, cement, steel, paint (and so on) or a series of dance steps or chopped vegetables and meat sitting on a plate with an array of coloured spices waiting to be cooked, or a song cycle waiting to be sung or music made by plucking or striking or blowing (p.162).

So what does it take for these raw ingredients to turn into important cultural heritage? What does it take for UNESCO to eventually declare it 'world cultural heritage'? What is it that brings in the audiences and visitors? What is needed for people to really appreciate a world heritage site in Sukhothai, or a Balinese dance performance in Denpasar, the famous statue of David in the Accademia in Florence, the renowned Luang Prabang Buddha in Laos or the excavations in Pompeii and so on? Those are the questions this book is devoted

to (and those are some of the many examples described in it).

How has the heritage profession tried to serve the public, how does it do so today? How has the approach to interpreting tangible or intangible heritage developed over the years? How to adapt interpretation strategies to changing circumstances, such as the development of the World Wide Web or the emergence of worldwide cultural tourism? These are some more of the questions that Russell Staiff's great book: *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation. Enchanting the Past-Future* deals with.

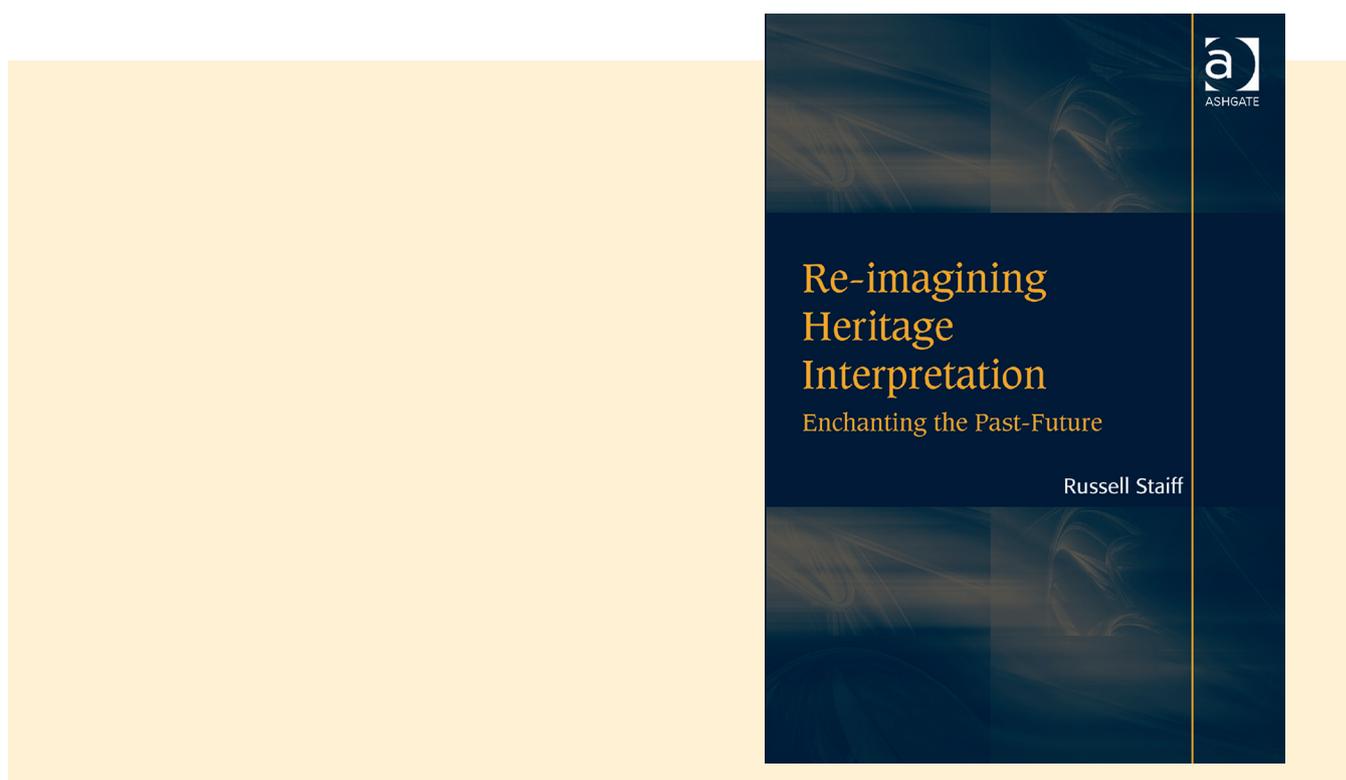
Obviously, the situation now, at the time of publication of this book, is rather different from the situation in 1957, when Freeman Tilden first published his classic textbook *Interpreting Our Heritage*. We have

worldwide cultural mass tourism now, in the 1950s it was only limited, elite tourism. We have the World Wide Web with its access to all information, to social media, to web 2.0 and so on; our parents and grandparents in the 1950s at best could look things up in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, in the books at home or eventually through a national library service at their disposal. So circumstances differ drastically, and so do the parameters that define what is relevant in heritage interpretation. What context and interpretational support is needed, for example, for an Australian visitor to Luang Prabang where he sees a Buddha to which he has no cultural attachment, or for a Chinese tourist who has come to Florence and happens to walk up to Michelangelo's sculpture of David, of which he has not heard of before (and neither has he heard of Goliath!)?

Staiff sets off on his intellectual journey of discovery – and that is how I would basically label this book – by explicitly distancing himself from the mind set and paradigms of Tilden and his school of heritage interpretation. The traditional Tilden-paradigm would place the meaning of heritage in the stones, or objects or whatever heritage we consider, and thus sees heritage interpretation as a process of extracting and revealing all important information from the object. To then be produced by a single, loud and clear authority. Staiff

replaces this paradigm by heritage interpretation as a system of representation and meaning-making that draws from all sorts of sources. Interpretation respects cultural differences and observes sensitivities, engages in conversations and asks questions, relates to the visitors' individual preferences, backgrounds and cultural baggage rather than providing ready-made answers. It is interpretation that creates an experience that makes sense and provides pleasure.

Re-imagining heritage interpretation, enchanting the past-future is a very careful, step by step exploration of all the issues and parameters that are involved in connecting an interested audience to cultural heritage. It is a very personal quest to answer the question of what makes a heritage experience into something special, and – on the other hand – of what makes it a failure. In that quest, the author has processed all relevant scholarly literature in this and related fields of scholarly research; and besides that, he draws upon the vast reservoir of his own formative cultural experiences in museums, film, theatres, sites and so on. Not least, an important ingredient for the book is the author's experience as the leader of a combined Thai-Australian research team that was commissioned to review the interpretation programme at the Sukhothai Historical Park in Thailand. Or, in the words of the author himself:



...the constant vacillation between heritage as the unexpected and heritage as strongly framed by knowledge practices has led the author to think anew about relationships between people and heritage places.

The book is not an easy-to-read manual for any heritage professional going about his or her daily chore of enchanting the public. Rather, it is a must for him or her, once he or she starts seriously reflecting about his or her own business! It is a long conversation and a very

fine invitation to engage in all the relevant issues and consider all parameters that go into the equation of successful and relevant interpretation. *For me*, the author concludes his thoughts, *conversation is more important than reaching agreement or being subject to (or subjugated by) something someone else has already agreed upon*. This captures what Staiff sees as the most important objective in heritage interpretation; it applies equally well to the book itself. It really is a must for anyone seriously interested in heritage interpretation. 🇬🇧