



INTERPRETING SITES OF CONSCIENCE

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October 2013

Prepared for the National Association for Interpretation's 2013 National Workshop

What does it mean to call a place a site of conscience? While the word *conscience* has associations with fairness and justice, the stories surrounding these sites most often describe situations where there was an overwhelming lack of both these things. Therefore, a place becomes a site of conscience not simply by virtue of what happened there, but rather through the telling of those difficult stories. Sites of conscience have cultural, political, and environmental implications that present an interpretive challenge. Sites of conscience are easily politicized as a result of a story's cultural and/or political legacy and the physical location of this storytelling in a modern community.

There are many mechanisms for conveying stories and messages associated with sites of conscience. Personal interaction is highly effective because it allows for the communication of first-hand experience. The Greyhound Bus Station in Blytheville, Arkansas, where racial segregation elements of the building still survive, features an exhibit with an interactive phone booth in which the visitor can hear oral histories. One such oral history comes from Vera James whose memories allow the visitors to form an image of daily life in a segregated south. These memories also enable visitors to take away an appreciation for the telling of difficult stories, when, as Vera herself says, "memories are not so pleasant, but... are important." Personal experience can also lend itself to relatively unknown or hidden stories. Just three hours south of Blytheville is the former Japanese American internment camp at Rohwer. Here the audio guide is based on research and interviews with former internees and narrated by the actor George Takei. Takei himself is a former internee a public advocate for what has largely been a hidden set of events in American history. His advocacy serves as a call to action for visitors.

There are interpretive challenges, however, to personal experience with a site of conscience. At Robben Island, South Africa, visitor tours are led by former prisoners who spent many nights in the inhospitable cells and many days working in the limestone quarry. This close association presents challenges to unbiased interpretation. The experiences of former prisoners are an absolutely integral part of telling the story of Robben Island, but caution is needed if they are the primary method of interpretation. Moreover using former prisoners as guides is not a sustainable form of interpretation, as they will not be around to tell future generations. Sites of conscience may not always be in the original location. Instead they may be

associated with an artifact that was associated with a significant historical event. Interactive interpretation can be an effective tool in these specific settings where a message of conscience is to be conveyed. At the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, an actor playing the role of a young student activist leads visitors through a non-violent protest training session focused around the lunch counter where the Greensboro sit-in took place in the 1960s. The experience is based on an actual training outline from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and invites visitors to imagine being faced with the hostility that faced the Greensboro protestors and many others who fought for Civil Rights during this era.

Art can be an effective means of interpretation whether it is political, reflective, or simply a window into an individual's personal talent. At Alcatraz, the graffiti from American Indian activists has been preserved on the water tower. This is a visible remnant of the American Indian occupation and the words encapsulate the purposes of their protest: "Peace and Freedom. Welcome. Home of the Free Indian Land." These words are all that remain of an 18-month occupation. Not far away, at Angel Island, the poetry-graffiti of Chinese immigrants have been preserved in the walls of the detention barracks. These characters embody the limbo and feelings of uncertainty that both individuals and whole families experienced as they waited to begin new lives in the United States. The accompanying interpretive panels preserve the original Chinese characters next to an English translation. There are also two audio options through which visitors can listen to the poem in the original Chinese or translated English. This preservation of language provides authenticity while the translation promotes accessibility.

Art meets interpretation in towns all across Germany where sidewalk pavers commemorate Holocaust victims. These 'stumbling blocks,' created by artist Guenther Demnig, are placed outside of the buildings from which Jews were evicted. The bricks bear the victim's name, date of birth, day of eviction, and location of death. These simple pavers are integrated into daily life to engage the public in a shared past. This commemoration effort has, however, received criticism. Some feel that the seamless integration and every-day nature of the brick pavers trivializes the experience of the victims. The potential for trivialization is indeed an interpretive challenge when dealing with sites of conscience, but with careful thought and planning, it can be avoided. At the Mille Lacs Indian Museum, there are several workshops focusing on traditional Ojibwa arts and crafts including moccasins, woodland pottery, and porcupine quill jewelry. Workshops such as these have the potential to commodify cultural practices that have long been exploited by the dominate European, and later American, cultures. Nevertheless, these workshops, usually led by members of the Ojibwa tribe, have become a source of traditional livelihood and a way to actively engage these cultural arts in the community.

Through effective interpretation, sites of conscience have the potential to become meaningful fixtures in the community. In order to achieve this it is important to guide the interpretive experience and consider why a story matters to a community and how they want to share it. This will inform the interpretive options best suited for expressing the stories to engage local or remote audiences. As a result, preserving and effectively conveying the legacy of these places and experiences will encourage us to respond when we witness injustice today.

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