

CHAPTER 3

INTERPRETATION OF THE SITE AND VISITOR EDUCATION

Successful interpretation and presentation of your site for the visitor begins with a vision and a plan. The plan must begin with a consideration of the visitors. Who are they? What are they looking for? What do you want them to see and learn and enjoy? Then the plan must specifically describe all the elements that will be part of the interpretation - written materials, visual and graphic displays, exhibits, sensory and physical opportunities. The plan must also aim to communicate particular themes and ideas that in the opinion of site administrators and staff conveys the essence of the site's meaning.

What can you do to be sure the visitors don't just see your site but they understand it; that they don't just visit but that they feel the pulse of the history and the tempo of the place? This chapter's purpose is to help answer these questions.

The Many Kinds of Visitors

Every site attracts particular kinds of visitors. They have different interests, may speak different languages, and have different motivations for visiting the site. Some are on a patriotic journey, others are on pilgrimage. Some come out of curiosity, others to make another check-mark on a personal list of conquests. Some come out of a lifelong wish, others come to be off the beaten track. People from every walk of life and every disposition will visit the site. For the purpose of interpretation and education, it is useful to think of the visitors according to the following categories. It is best to provide for their various expectations.

The Scholar Visitor - Some visitors will come well prepared and familiar with the history of the site. They know prior to arriving many of the site's features and attractions they especially want to experience first-hand. For this visitor-audience the primary responsibility is to make their visit as pleasant, easy and informative as possible. They will not usually want to be rushed, they may want to visit the site at their own pace rather than with an

organized group, they may spend extended periods visiting, studying and photographing a few significant elements. They will be interested in looking at and purchasing special publications concerning the site that are not readily available in other outlets. They will be knowledgeable, and possibly critical, of what is being presented for public interpretation. If they utilize a guide, they may expect a high level of expert presentation.

The General Visitor - Some visitors will come to the site because they have heard about it, or have read a little about it in a tour book, but generally they have scant knowledge of it. They will be seeking a more comprehensive presentation of the site which provides them with a general understanding of its place in international, national and local historic contexts. This type of visitor represents a major target audience of the interpretation program. They should leave believing that they have had an informative visit and will encourage their friends and acquaintances to visit the site.

Students - The site is likely to be visited by many school students. Depending on their educational level, a separate interpretative program will be required for them. The program must focus on a few essential lessons, provide comprehensible written materials, and be kept to a length that will not tire them or tax their capacity to concentrate. So as not to disturb other visitors, school groups can be scheduled for visits separately and provided with separate introductory centers.

The Reluctant Visitor - A small segment of your visitors will be people who have been brought to the site as part of a package tour or group outing. They come with little if any advance understanding of the site and are often there just because this is where the bus brought them. They are often more interested in the amenities -- where can I get something to drink, where are the toilets, where can I sit down and where is the gift shop? They should be made to feel welcome and encouraged to experience the site. Be patient, don't be overly concerned; more may rub off on them than you or they realize.

Reception and Visitor Orientation Center

As a basic element, the site should have a visitor reception and orientation center. Here the visitor first stops to purchase an admission ticket, secure a guidebook and/or brochure and view an introductory site exhibit. For larger, heavily visited sites, an audio-visual program shown on a regular schedule might also be made available. At the point that the visitor leaves this first stop, he or she should have a basic understanding of the site's significance, its size and what it offers to visitors in terms of experiencing the site. For large sites, such as an urban historic district or a large battlefield, there may be a need for more than one visitor reception/information area.

Exhibits intended to explain specific elements within a site usually are most effectively located away from the main entry point and in close proximity to the element they depict. For large sites with widely dispersed

points of specific interest, trailside exhibit panels may be an effective means of interpreting these remote points. Often such exhibits are small and are presented on outdoor panels. When used, these panels must be specifically designed to be weather and vandal resistant.

Printed Information

Advertisements - Not all World Heritage Sites need to advertise their existence. For those that do, advertisements in travel magazines, newspapers, trade journals and on radio and television are often the way in which many visitors first learn of the site and become interested in visiting it. Advertisements are often the first element in the visitor's interpretative experience. Advertisements need to be both graphically appealing and historically informative in an abbreviated fashion. Don't hesitate to call in the advertising experts.

For sites that can afford such a program, a planned annual advertising campaign is an important element in reaching the potential audience. While professional advice and service are important, it is also necessary to retain close control over what the advertising presents to the public. It is important to be involved with the advertising agency at key times throughout the development and production of the program -- not just at the beginning. The message reaching the potential visitor through print, sound or visual images needs to be of high quality, clear, consistent and reinforcing.

In some instances, public and privately owned sites may be able to secure either donated or discounted services from leading advertising firms as part of their public service program. Magazine and newspaper editors will also at times be willing to use readily available, pre-prepared advertisements to fill unsold advertising space in their publications. Collaborative advertising campaigns can also be developed in conjunction with local chambers of commerce, national, regional or city tourist offices, major local hotels and/or national airlines.

Brochures - A brochure, preferably illustrated, is a basic necessity for any site. For sites charging an admission fee, the cost of the brochure should be built into the price of the ticket. For sites with no admission fee, it can either be distributed free or sold for a nominal fee to the visitor. Its content should include basic historical and introductory information, the schedule of the site's operation, and the amenities available. It should be illustrated with a good map and a few representative photographs or drawings. It should be available in the local language, in English and in the languages of the other most frequent visitors. It should be designed to easily fold into a shape that fits in a pocket, purse or carrying case and be easy to use.

Guidebook - In addition to the basic brochure, a more comprehensive, illustrated guidebook to the site should be available for purchase. It should be sold at a location that will be passed by all visitors entering the site. Again, it should be available in the local language, English and the language(s) of the most frequent visitors. The preparation, publication and sale of such a guide

may be developed as a joint venture between the site and a commercial publisher. The site is in a position to provide the necessary historic data, photographs, illustrations, etc. The publisher is in a position to provide the writing, editing, design, production, and marketing skills.

Books - Visitors who have had an enjoyable and informative visit to your site may want to purchase one or more books before leaving. They want to learn more about it, they want to take something home to remind them of their visit and/or they want to give something to a friend or relative. A range of books of different types (historical, pictorial, interpretive), prices (inexpensive to expensive) and reading level (child to adult; general public to scholar) should be available. A well-designed display of these books in a gift shop, easily available to both the arriving and departing visitor, is an important interpretation element. Two things to remember: most children's books are purchased by adults. Also, don't try to stock everything -- specialize in books that emphasize the significance of your site.

Maps - Just as it is important to have your site located and identified on standard national, state and regional highway maps, good location maps are important for the visitor at the site. People like to know where they are and where they are going in relation to the total site. A large, easily readable, well-illustrated map posted at the entrance is a must. Smaller maps and/or building floor plans, placed at key locations around the site are also important. For an urban historic district, large maps should be placed at key public gathering places. Each map, in addition to depicting the entire district, should highlight the most significant buildings and sites within the immediate area. The site administrator should work with all local public transportation authorities -- railways, metros, streetcar, bus, etc. -- to insure that the maps in both the transport vehicles and at the station clearly mark the stops at your site.

Signage

Well-designed and well-placed signs are a key part of any site's overall interpretation program. If at all possible, a readily comprehensible graphic logo unique to the site should be developed for use in conjunction with the World Heritage logo. It should be used on all signs, maps and printed materials related to the site. Signage should be part of the comprehensive plan. Size, design, graphics, colors, materials, etc., should all be coordinated. While it might appear economically attractive, aesthetically it is not advisable to allow commercial companies to place their advertising signs on service elements within the site, i.e., waste baskets for which they may be willing to both purchase and pay an advertising fee. The following types of signs need to be considered. It is best to use the internationally recognized symbols and colors wherever possible.

Highway Directional - Working with local transportation authorities, a signage program should be developed to provide general directions to the

site. In some instances, state or national highway authorities have graphic standards for such signs and they can exercise rigid control over the design and placement of signs. For visitors leaving a site, it is often just as important to have simple directional signs to route them efficiently back from where they came. Where commercial highway advertising is allowed, a distinctive sign, often with the distance to the site noted, is an important visitor stimulus and service. It is important to insure that such commercial signs are well maintained over time.

Signs Around and On Site - As visitors approach the site, it is important that signs direct them to where you want them to go. Usually this will be to the main entrance and to the automobile and bus parking facilities. Directional signs at the entrance should be simple and direct so as to be easily comprehended from a moving vehicle. In those instances where public security may be an issue, signs may be required in the parking lots to warn visitors that the site administration is not responsible for valuable articles left unattended in parked vehicles. Directional signs should also indicate special areas where trucks, vans and buses should go. In urban areas, signs may also be required to limit the parking time so as not to have the parking area used by local residents and employees. Within the site, directional signs should be designed and placed to provide the visitor with clear directions on how to utilize the visitor circulation path(s), to locate public services and amenities and to locate the exit. At major interpretative points, signs can provide the visitor with basic information. All of these need to be sensitively designed and placed so that they do not intrude on photographs of the historic scene, vistas or the building character. Signs need to be fabricated and mounted in such a way as to be both weatherproof and vandal resistant. Felt pens and spray-paint have become universal threats to monuments. The damage that they create can be frighteningly permanent. Removing them is often itself destructive to patina and materials. Short of conducting body-searches, there is no foolproof protection, but visible on-site security can reduce the problem.

Emergency Signs - For buildings, local regulatory codes may require the placement of lighted signs to direct visitors to emergency exits. Signs should clearly identify the location of emergency fire-fighting equipment.

Exhibits

Exhibits, incorporating a combination of text, graphics, objects, models, dioramas and audio-visual elements, can add greatly to the visitor's experience in understanding the site. The planning, design, fabrication and installation of exhibits is best left to professional exhibit designers. Should these services not be available within your organization, care should be taken in selecting outside contractors. What will be produced will likely have a long life, be seen by thousands of national and international visitors and be an expensive undertaking. It is, therefore, important to carefully interview contractors, review examples of prior work and check their references.

It is important that site administrators and staff carefully delineate through the exhibit program the essential lessons and themes of the site. Everything that is known cannot be shared with visitors. The task is to define and limit the interpretative effort to the most significant and interesting themes and points. A master exhibit plan for the whole site, even if it cannot be implemented all at the same time, is an important planning step.

Narrated Slide Presentation

An automated slide projection system, with an accompanying narrative tape, provides one of the least expensive and most flexible audio-visual alternatives. The program can be easily altered or updated. Introductory shows should be shown near the main entrance area in a properly designed space. The space should be reasonably darkened, properly ventilated and with some simple seating. The length of the show should not exceed five minutes.

Video Tape Presentation

Video presentations are becoming more widespread and replacing slide presentations in many places. Video production requires the services of a company that can produce both the desired script and visual images and then edit them into an interesting presentation. While being more durable than a slide presentation, video is more expensive and is less flexible for updating or revising. Because of the widespread use of video tapes, and their growing popularity as a site souvenir, tapes can be sold to visitors to help recoup the cost of producing the original version. Presentations can be highly flexible in length of time but most are 25-30 minutes. Their length may require a small theater or a separate space for viewing.

Film

Good for large and heavily visited sites, motion picture films are expensive to write, film, narrate, edit and produce. They require sophisticated equipment and personnel to be shown on a regular basis. For maximum visitor effect, films require proper screening rooms with good sight lines and acoustics. Film copies can be used in a highly productive way by national tourist offices around the world. For multi-purpose use, i.e., at the site and for promotional use away from the site (especially television), motion picture films should not exceed 25 minutes.

Rental Tape-recorded Tours

Popular with many museum exhibits, rental audio tapes are becoming more popular at cultural heritage sites. The visitor rents a cassette player, headphones and a tape in the appropriate language and takes a self-guided

tour of the site. The narration provides the visitor with directions and descriptions of selected site elements. For sites associated with historic or associative figures whose voices survive on electronic tapes, it is often effective to incorporate these voices in the narration. The use of a prominent individual's voice to narrate the tour can also add interest and meaning to the experience. Such presentations are usually lengthy and can last from 30 to 60 minutes.

Pre-Recorded Station Stops

Often used in conjunction with a permanently mounted visual exhibit, pre-recorded voice narrations are activated by visitors pushing a button. Special attention has to be paid to the audio-level of such narration so that it does not become intrusive to other visitors. These presentations are usually brief, lasting no more than one or two minutes.

Car Radio

For large sites, where visitors may drive significant distances by automobile to experience the site, the use of low-frequency radio directions and narratives may be appropriate. Additionally, radio can be used to guide arriving traffic to unloading points and parking lots.

Sound and Light Shows (*Son et Lumiere*)

At many World Heritage Sites, *son et lumiere* is used as a motivational and educational technique. This system also serves as an important source of additional visitor-generated income. It can also be the source of many problems.

Commercial producers of shows, or of lighting equipment, tend to over-sell the potential revenues and under-sell the problems. The first question is who will attend the show, day-in, day-out, year-round, year after year. The shows are expensive to install and to operate and can seldom survive on local traffic or as mere weekend attractions. Most of them are used at the height of the tourist season. Tour operators should be consulted as to whether they will include the show in their packages; it is useless and expensive to proceed with a sound and light show if tour operators are not interested.

A feasibility study is the most important step. Beware of figures presented by suppliers or producers. The investment costs can be determined easily, but be sure there is careful financial analysis of anticipated revenues. Be sure the national tourism office is involved in estimating your projected revenues. Seek private advice from tour operators. Write to your preservation counter-parts in other countries who have experience with similar installations to get the benefit of their experience and knowledge.

If you decide to proceed, be sure to reserve contractual rights to approve the final script. The approved script must accurately portray the history of the site in a dignified fashion. Avoid the overly theatrical script.

The system's overall installation and design must be sensitive to the historic fabric of the site. It should be designed to impose only the most minimal intervention in the physical historic fabric. Any physical interventions should be done so that they are reversible. The color of all materials used in the installation should be compatible with the historic/natural colors at the site.

Son et lumiere requires the installation of a highly sophisticated system of electronics. All installation plans must be submitted to, and approved in advance, by the site administrator. The installation contract must provide for direct day-to-day supervision of the contractor's workers as they proceed with the actual installation.

The placement and concealment of wiring systems and the enclosure of lighting and sound systems require thorough consideration. It must be remembered that such systems will require sustained, ongoing maintenance and should be accessible for servicing. Every installation decision should be based on how it will affect the day-time visitor's opportunity to photograph the site and to enjoy an uncluttered experience.

Many *son et lumiere* installations, especially at large sites, require the movement of masses of people through the site in a darkened environment. Adequate safety lighting is essential. Permanent low-level lighting, directed at primary walkways may have to be supplemented by hand-held directional lighting used by site guards during the performances.

Many such public presentations are a combination of sequential mass movements through the site, followed by a final presentation that is made to a seated audience at a fixed location. The placement and design of this fixed seating arrangement can have a major impact on the physical characteristics of the cultural site. Seats may be portable chairs, benches or fixed bleachers. It is especially important when using fixed bleachers to be sure that they are sensitively positioned within the historic context of the site so as not to be visually disruptive. Any fixed seating should be designed so that it can be easily removed once the *son et lumiere* program is discontinued.

Guides

The skill and quality of guides can make or break a site's reputation. They need to be carefully selected, trained, monitored, evaluated and motivated. Several site policy issues relate to guides. Will all site guides be limited to those on the salaried staff? Will volunteers be recruited and trained? Will outside guides be allowed on the site?

Site Employed Guides - Limiting your guides to those on your salaried staff will usually provide the best quality control in the selection of candidates, consistency of training, evaluation of presentation and, if necessary, in termination. It is often desirable to have staff guides distinguished by uniforms -- appropriate period-clothing, a distinctive jacket,

hat or emblem. It is vitally important to develop and maintain an ongoing training program for all of your guides, paid or volunteer. New recruits need to be properly trained in what they are expected to impart to the visitors. Existing guides need to be periodically retrained to bring them up-to-date on information and visitor expectations. Where the site is large, guides should be rotated among stations or routes to avoid their becoming stale and boring in their presentations. Because of their close contact with visitors, your guides are in an excellent position to provide regular feedback to the site administration on current visitor thinking and reactions to the site experience. Where a membership program exists for the site, i.e., a national trust or "A Friends of..." group, guides can be given incentives to attract new members. If guides are salaried, a policy needs to be determined and enforced with regard to the solicitation and acceptance of tips from visitors. Many sites make use of volunteer guides or docents whose training is handled in the same fashion as that of paid guides. Docents may have the advantage of bringing great enthusiasm and a desire to spread the appreciation of the site. The monitoring of site guides is especially important. At random intervals a qualified consultant or professional colleague, unknown to the guides, should be retained to take a tour among regular visitors and prepare a written evaluation report on the quality of the guides' work. These reports should be used in conducting the annual performance evaluation of each guide.

Outside Guides - Access by any outside, non-staff guide to the site should be governed by a licensing procedure. You need to be in a position to exercise quality control over what these guides are presenting to visitors. Depending on the country, these procedures may be the administrative responsibility of the national tourism office or the ministry of culture. Regulations need to be developed and applied concerning use of portable loudspeakers, group tour signs and the sale of any items within the site.

Accommodation of Special Visitors

Certain World Heritage Sites may have to be closed to the general public on days of particular religious or national significance. These closings should be well publicized in advance. On these special days, special visitors with a religious or patriotic affiliation merit special attention. Their appreciation of the site and their ties to it are strong and constant. They also are people who could provide support to the site in many ways. Special interpretive materials produced for their visits might emphasize recent research findings of interest to them, or specific site conservation needs which they might be motivated to support.

Special Exhibits for the Blind

Some sites have instituted special programmed tours for the visually impaired, who need more detailed narrations to grasp the significance of the

site. Small site models that through touching convey the size, scale and organization of the site are popular and instructive tools.

Languages

In addition to the national language, it is important to provide the basic interpretation services in at least the language of the highest number of international visitors. Multi-lingual resources should be considered for the site brochure, directional signs, site maps, exhibit labels and audio cassette tours.

Visitor Satisfaction Surveys

To know how you and your staff are succeeding in presenting your site to the visiting public, you should periodically conduct visitor surveys. The survey can be done by interviewing a cross-section of visitors or by giving them a pre-printed survey questionnaire card. Surveys need to be kept simple and direct with only the most important questions being asked. The information sought should be standardized to the degree possible to provide a long-term data base. Don't change all the questions each time a visitor survey is taken! The visitor should, to the maximum degree possible, be able to provide answers to written questions by checking boxes. Professional advice should be sought from individuals or firms experienced in conducting and evaluating the results of public opinion surveys.

Another technique which could be considered is that of "focus groups." In this situation, a limited number of visitors who have experienced the site are invited to meet together with a professional interviewer, to jointly discuss their views and responses to a set of issues and questions. For their services in such a group exercise, you may wish to present them with a small gift or complimentary meal.