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CONCLUSIONS

Design Implications: The Role of the Constructivist Design Approach in Historical Site Interpretation

The goal of this thesis was to explore how the landscape can play a more active role in historic interpretation. The design of the Appalachian slavery interpretive center provided an opportunity to explore the use of the Constructivist Design Approach as a means of achieving this objective. Although nothing short of building the complex can speak definitively about the success of the venture, the project nevertheless suggests that the Constructivist Design Approach can be applied successfully in an historical site interpretation context and that the resulting increased interaction between the visitor and the landscape can enhance individuals' understanding of history.

Through their physical, intellectual, and emotional interaction with their surroundings, visitors are encouraged to construct their own understandings of a historical circumstance. In this way, history becomes more personally relevant and meaningful. Through their interaction with the landscape, visitors to the Appalachian slavery interpretive center are able to use themselves—physically and psychologically—as a reference point from which to understand the experiences of mountain slaves. They feel their own leg muscles straining as they flee up a hill or stumble over rough terrain. They notice their own sense of fear and apprehension as they leave the relative safety of a hedgerow to dash across an open pasture. These sensations, generated through their interaction with the

landscape, become the measuring stick against which they speculate about the experiences of real runaway slaves. To return to architect James Ingo Freed's metaphor of the physical site as a resonator for the individual, the Constructivist Design Approach also enables the individual to become a resonator for the landscape, as both its tangible and ephemeral qualities are registered and reacted to in each individual's body and psyche.

This thesis suggests that the constructivist approach ultimately makes history more accessible and relevant to the general public. It removes the historical narrative from its protective glass case, takes it out of the museum, and into the landscape where it can be handled and examined more closely. It acknowledges and indeed celebrates the dual nature of the historical narrative, which is at once grounded in fact but often derives its greatest insights from imaginative and informed speculation. The constructivist approach to interpretation presented in this thesis provides an opportunity for the public, not just historians, to engage in this educated speculation.

To return to the framework of ritual theory that helped shape the Constructivist Design Approach, the Appalachian slavery interpretive complex is designed not to freeze in time and preserve a historical moment but to offer an opportunity for the ritualized performance of historical understandings derived from the historiographic research. At the core of every ritual is the interaction of an individual, a physical place, and an activity—and the power of that interaction to transform human understanding. The Appalachian slavery interpretive complex likewise offers individuals the opportunity to interact with the landscape as runaway slaves as a means of transforming their own understanding of this historical moment.

Methodological Implications: The Role of the Landscape Architect in Historical Site Interpretation

In demonstrating that the landscape can play a vital role in communicating historical understandings, this thesis also suggests the important contributions that landscape architects can make to the field of historic site interpretation. This thesis employed a design process that relied heavily on an ongoing dialogue between historiographic research and physical design. From site selection to the development of overall design concepts and the spatial arrangement of landscape elements, the complex's design evolved from the continual exchange and interplay between the historiographic research and the Constructivist Design Approach. This process allowed the physical design to respond to and reflect the historical understandings gained from research to a degree not possible when landscape architects or architects are removed from the research process. Site design carried out with minimal information about interpretive content or without the benefit of a firsthand examination of the results of the historiographic research create

generic physical spaces with little capacity for inspiring interaction from visitors. Ultimately, it is this dialogue between the design of the physical environment and the interpretive context that enriches visitors' experiences at the site.

While this process posits that landscape architects should be closely involved with the historiographic research that defines the interpretive content of a site, it does not imply that a landscape architect can do the job of a historian. Rather, it argues for a more intimate collaboration between the two professions. Just as the landscape architect must be a part of the research process, the historian must participate in the site design process. Landscape architects have much to learn from historians' understandings of the past. Likewise, historians can also benefit from the landscape architect's perspective of history, which focuses on the landscape's role in shaping culture and events as well as man's impact on the environment. Applied to other interpretive projects, this collaborative methodology will help to ensure that the interpretation at historical sites is not only solidly grounded in the historical record but also possesses the ability to communicate historical understandings to a wide audience in a manner that makes them personally relevant and meaningful.

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