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ARTICULATING THE
CONSTRUCTIVIST
DESIGN APPROACH

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*As she lay dying, Gertrude Stein asked,
“What is the answer?” No answer came.
She laughed and said,
“In that case, what is the question?”*

-Schiller, 1994, p. 366

Humans seem compelled to look for meaning in their world. Yet, as Stein suggests, the wording of the question is perhaps more important than the answer, because the answer one finds largely depends on the phrasing of the question. Many landscape architects, too, are concerned with the question of meaning in their built work. More specifically, how to design and build more meaningful spaces—places that resonate with users, that invite a connection beyond the purely physical interaction of bodies and space. Places that stay with a visitor, even after they have physically left it. The aim of this theoretical investigation is to explore how landscape architects can articulate the question of meaning in a way that taps the fullest potential of their work as practitioners. In other words, it outlines a theoretical framework through which the landscape architect can operate in order to make possible the greatest opportunity for meaningful built work.

Phrasing the Question

A landscape architect’s approach to the question of how to build meaningful places—the phrasing of the question—is

decided at the most general level by the designer’s epistemological stance. It is critical for landscape architects to define their stance, because it begins to influence their ability to build meaningful places. The chosen epistemological stance shapes the question, and in doing so, limits the potential answers. Epistemology, as Hamlyn defines it, is the study of the “nature of knowledge, its possibility, scope, and general basis” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8), or more simply put, it is “how we know what we know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). How knowledge, or meaning, is communicated has significant ramifications on the work of landscape architects wishing to create meaningful places.

Epistemologies span a wide range of beliefs and approaches but, for this discussion, are broken down into three stances: subjectivism, objectivism, and constructivism. Subjectivists maintain that meaning “is imposed on the object by the subject” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Like a blank motion picture screen, elements of the external world merely reflect back the meanings that individuals project onto them without altering them in any way. These meanings may spring from such sources as religious beliefs or human archetypes, but the key point is that they emanate from the subject’s mind. In subjectivism, “meaning comes from anything but an interaction between the subject and the object to which it is ascribed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Such an approach presents obvious limitations for landscape architects concerned with the generation of meaning, as it suggests that a designer’s work can have little or no effect on the meanings users project onto their designs. Accepting such a stance as a landscape architect would negate a designer’s potential to shape the meaning of a site.

At the other end of the spectrum, objectivism posits that objects have “intrinsic meaning” that exists “apart from the operation of any consciousness” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). The

meaning of an object is independent of its being perceived. In this view, which characterizes most of Western science, the meaning of the external world is merely an equation or a puzzle to be solved, “if we go about it in the right way” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). This approach also limits the role of the landscape architect in the production of meaning. Design becomes “a matter of finding universally understood symbol[s]” (Isenstadt, 1997, p. 62) and arranging them in decipherable units, like Scrabble tiles waiting to be ordered into intelligible words. The designer is merely a puzzle-solver. And although landscape architecture certainly has within it a problem-solving dimension, the potential of the profession should extend beyond this limited role into the realm of designing meaningful places.

Contrary to the two previous approaches, which either negate or severely limit a landscape architect’s potential for making meaningful places, constructivism phrases the question of meaning in a way that offers more potential for the designer. Constructivism holds that meaning is created through “our engagement with the realities in our world. . . . Meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8-9). It sees subject and object as “partners in the generation of meaning” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). In essence, a conversation takes place between subject and object, as the physical object perceived begins to resonate in some way with the viewer’s own beliefs, knowledge, feelings, and experiences. The result of this encounter is an altering of the individual’s thoughts, attitudes, or feelings in regard to the physical object. In other words, the object takes on a meaning to the subject that in some way reflects or enriches the experiences and beliefs that the individual has brought to the encounter. Such an approach suggests meaning, as it relates to landscape architecture, is constructed through the interaction of site and user. The role of the land-

scape architect, then, is to understand the nature of this interaction and encourage and shape it, given the goals and intentions of the project. The complexity of such a task becomes apparent, however, when one considers that “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (Crotty, 1998, p. 9). Yet, it also suggests the potential to practice the kind of landscape architecture that is intimately engaged with the site and its users in the generation of meaning. It expands the question of meaning to a wider range of possible answers.

Conflicting Questions

Although constructivists do believe that objects hold some “inherent” meanings as cultural or archetypal symbols, they see these as part of the dialogue between subject and object regarding meaning, not—as objectivists believe—as an end in themselves. The debate between the objectivist and constructivist approaches to meaning in design has been played out most recently in published discussions of monument building and the generation of meaning. Although the arguments are expressed in terms of the physical design of public monuments, at their root, the arguments can be traced back to epistemological differences. The camps can be divided between objectivist designers and clients who believe that meaning of a national monument is defined through the symbolic architecture it employs. Their constructivist counterparts, however, believe that a monument’s meaning should not be fixed in its stone and mortar, but rather, should allow for individual interpretation and the generation of personal meanings. The debate pits supporters of the traditional memorials prominent through the middle of

the 20th century against proponents of contemporary memorials such as the Vietnam Memorial in Washington D.C. or the Oklahoma City National Memorial, which spring from a more constructivist approach. Traditional monuments, with their heroic figures carved in marble or granite, “celebrate national ideals and triumphs” (Young, 1999, p. 6). Grounded in objectivism, they rely on an established vocabulary of visual symbols—majestic eagles, garlands and wreaths, allusions to Greek architecture—to communicate national values like courage, honor, victory, and love of country. Their success relies on the objectivist notion that all visitors will “read” these architectural symbols in the same way and thus derive the meaning intended by the designer and client. Contemporary monuments, however, tend to avoid the use of traditional symbols and architectural elements and, through their more ambiguous messages, present greater opportunities for multiple, individual readings. Traditionalists argue from an objectivist orientation, privileging the one-way transmission of universal meanings and values from the site to the visitor. They defend the clarity and certainty of these messages and their method of transmission and criticize contemporary sites like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial for failing to celebrate clear universal values like victory and courage. Supporters of the contemporary monument style, however, argue that as time passes the meanings embodied in many traditional sites have lost their resonance with the public and function only as a “mute locus of civic ceremony” (Twardy, 2000, p. 48). The statue of a once renowned war hero becomes just a nameless figure astride a horse. Whereas traditionalists assume that a monument’s meaning “is as fixed as its place in the landscape” (Young, 1999, p. 6), constructivists point out that the memorial whose meaning cannot change over time or allow for multiple interpretations becomes nothing more than a

“dislocated sign” (Young, 1999, p. 6) whose referent has lost its resonance with the public. As architect James Ingo Freed (1993), designer of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. observed, “Monuments tend to be too unified, too unitary, restricting different possibilities of readings and interpretations” (p. 90). With their reliance on universal messages, objectivist designs leave little possibility for the user to participate in the meaning-making process.

The contemporary or constructivist approach to memorials, however, seeks to engage the individual visitor in the creation of meaning, believing that this interaction is the process from which real meaning springs. As one architect puts it, “If architecture speaks, then it speaks in the second person: Everything is waiting for ‘you’ ” (Isenstadt, 1997, p. 62). In other words, a memorial—or any other site—is only completely activated when inhabited. As each visitor is invited to engage with a site—to interpret it and respond to it in a unique way—the space is renewed and reinvigorated through that interaction. As Isenstadt (1997) says, meaning is “less a matter of finding a universally understood symbol than of continuing to inspire interpretation” (p. 62). Constructivists see this dialogue between visitor and site as the genesis of meaning. Whereas the traditional approach to monument design limits the landscape architect’s role to the manipulation of symbols, the constructivist approach offers greater challenge and potential for designers—creating places that engage the visitor.

This brief exploration of theoretical frameworks demonstrates that the constructivist approach to design holds the most opportunity for the landscape architect interested in creating meaningful places. With this theoretical framework in place, the next step is to begin developing an operational framework to guide the work of the constructivist landscape architect.

RITUAL THEORY

The formulation of a constructivist approach to landscape architecture—one that emphasizes the interaction of visitor and site in the generation of meaning—must begin with an exploration of the mechanisms that can contribute to this meaning-making process. The study of ritual theory offers potential insights into these mechanisms, as many contemporary ritual theorists have also focused their attention on the interaction of subject and object in the meaning-making process. Specifically, they have begun to study the interaction of the individual, through his behavior and movement, with ritual structure and space in the transformation of the individual's understanding of his community and his place in it. The following research details how an understanding of ritual space can contribute to effective constructivist design.

Anthropologists have studied ritual and its role in the generation of meaning since the 1800s. Just as monument building can be understood as undergoing a change in perspective from an objectivist to a constructivist approach, anthropology has experienced a similar shift in orientation. Early ritual theorists such as Emile Durkheim, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown, and (to a lesser extent) Arnold Van Gennep (Bell, 1997, p. 12, 27, 37) studied ritual at the scale of the community and conceptualized ritual meanings as fixed and constant across time and individuals. In essence, meaning was located in the object (in this case, the ritual event and the symbolism it employed) and was independent of the participants. These early theorists believed ritual functioned in the same way that traditionalists believe monuments operate—to reaffirm permanent community values by “attempting to present, model, and instill a coherent

and systematic unity within all human experience” (Bell, 1997, p. 12). Although individuals participated in the rituals, these early models paid little attention to the unique thoughts and feelings of each actor and their potential impact on the ritual itself. The possibility of personalized ritual meanings was discounted. It was simply assumed that each participant was in complete accord with the social meanings embodied in the rituals.

Gradually, however, ritual theorists began to acknowledge the impact of the individual on ritual meaning (Bell, 1997, p. 74; Crain, 1998, p. 137). Performance theory, which emerged in anthropology in the 1970s, essentially marked a shift in ritual studies from an objectivist to constructivist approach. The corresponding shift in focus from the community to the individual scale opened a new world for ritual theorists. Like the astronomers who first saw the moon through a telescope, ritual theorists began to see a new terrain for the study of meaning. What was previously thought to be the smooth, uniform surface of ritual was in reality rent with the fissures and peaks of individual choice and action. Meanings imbedded in ritual did indeed influence the behavior and beliefs of participating individuals, but at the same time, this new breed of ritual theorists saw that the topography of ritual meaning was also modified by the actions and attitudes of individual performers. As Bell (1997) says of ritual performance, “Past patterns are reproduced but also reinterpreted or transformed” (p. 83) at the scale of the individual. Performance theorists became interested in the diversions of participants from the ritual script. Although previously dismissed as mistakes, this new generation of theorists saw these as evidence of the creation of individualized meanings through ritual performance. Unlike their predecessors who concerned themselves with “universal” or community-wide

meanings, performance theorists began to address the processes by which ritual becomes meaningful to the individual.

Characteristics of Rituals

The definition of ritual dramatically broadened with this new approach. Early theorists such as Durkheim and Radcliffe-Brown defined ritual narrowly—as codified activities specifically relating to religious beliefs. With the rise of performance theory in the past 30 years, however, the definition of ritual has expanded to include secular activities such as attending a baseball game or eating lunch (Bell, 1997). In this broader context, the distinguishing feature of ritual is activity through which individuals “reproduce and reshape their social and cultural environments” (Bell, 1997, p. 76). In other words, rituals are activities from which people generate meaning. This looser definition begins to overlap with the activities in a landscape architect’s purview—outings to public parks, memorials, recreational trails, and even residential gardens.

Bell has identified several characteristics common to most rituals. Not all rituals emphasize or even exhibit all of these characteristics, but the list offers general insights into the nature of ritual.

Formalism. In general, rituals are formal activities, with behavior constrained by a set of rules or a code of conduct. Performance theorists would liken this to the ritual script. As Bell explains, formalism governs “*how* something can be expressed” as well as “*what* can be expressed” (Bell, 1997, p. 139). This rule-governed behavior tends to reinforce the status quo, but as performance theorists point out, it also gives ritual

participants material to subvert and appropriate in order to generate their own meanings.

Traditionalism. Rituals gain some of their prestige and credibility by appealing to “the way it’s always been done.” Many successful rituals appear to be identical to or at least consistent with older cultural practices. More recent ritual inventions tend to cloak themselves in allusions to older, well-established traditions in order to gain instant credibility (Bell, 1997, p. 145).

Invariance/Repetition. This quality refers to the typically highly choreographed movements that are repeated in each ritual performance. For example, every movement in the Japanese tea ceremony, from the number of times the tea is stirred to the manner in which it is poured, is highly controlled (Bell, 1997, p. 150).

Rule Governance. The rules of behavior that come with rituals often serve to hold chaos in check. This could be the “chaos of personal self-interest” (Bell, 1997, p. 153) and antisocial desires that threaten the bonds of community.

Sacral Symbolism. Rituals often appeal to a higher or supernatural power. This quality helps to mark ritual space as sacred in opposition to profane non-ritual space. This differentiation of space helps mark ritual as special and authoritative (Bell, 1997, p. 156).

With this basic understanding of the qualities of rituals, a closer examination of the common structure and function of the physical spaces in which they take place is now possible.

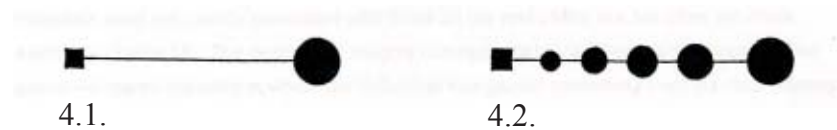
Characteristics of Ritual Space

The key to understanding the physical structure of a ritual space—its setting and use of physical space—is to remember that the physical journey made by a participant within this space symbolically parallels his or her psychological and emotional journey from the start to the end of the ritual. In ritual, there is a conflation of time and space, physical and spiritual. As architect Thomas Barrie (1996) explains it, ritual is “the symbolic narrative facilitated by the architectural setting of path and place” (p. 73). In this way, a constant dialogue exists between the emotional/psychological environment of the participant and his or her physical surroundings, and because of this, a designer has the opportunity to influence an individual’s internal state through the manipulation of physical space.

The structural analysis of ritual space owes much to the work of Arnold Van Gennep, who described the basic psychological structure of the rituals occurring at major life events, such as birth, marriage, and death. Van Gennep saw a three-part structure to ritual activity: separation, liminality, and reincorporation. The basic intent of ritual, according to Van Gennep, is to prepare the individual to leave his or her former role or station in life and accept a new one (Bell, 1997, p. 94). In other words, to understand anew his environment and his place in it. In the separation phase, a man about to be married, for example, must prepare to give up his identity as a bachelor. The bachelor party, which emphasizes the “last day of freedom” can be interpreted as a separation rite. It is a highly stylized reenactment of bachelor life in concentrated form. The liminal phase is what Victor Turner describes as being “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1969, p. 95)—no longer single but not yet married. This phase often has a strong educational component,

as the initiate must learn about his new responsibilities. The marriage ceremony itself, with its sermons on the qualities of successful unions, serves as this liminal space. The final stage is the reincorporation of the individual back into society, but in a new role. This moment is signified at the end of the marriage ceremony when the couple is introduced to the friends and family gathered as husband and wife.

Although Van Gennep was describing the internal landscape of ritual with his tripartite structure, he also noted that this structure was also often expressed in the physical landscape of the ritual space: “The passage from one social position to another is identified with a territorial passage, such as the movement from one room to another, or the crossing of streets and squares” (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 192). For example, thresholds and doorways often become physical indicators of entry into ritual space or indicators of a change in status (such as carrying a bride over the threshold). Barrie (1996) identifies this basic physical structure of ritual space as a marked origin, a path, and a sacred center at the end of the path (Figure 4.1). In the more complex variation, the path is punctuated by a series of “rooms” (either physically defined spaces or temporal events) of increasing sacredness culminating in the sacred destination (see Figure 4.2).



Figures 4.1 and 4.2. The basic components of ritual space are origin, path, and sacred center.

These ritual spaces tend to exhibit a common set of char-

acteristics. These characteristics use physical design elements to create or reinforce psychological states of mind. For this reason, they are characteristics that constructivist landscape architects could employ in their own work to create more meaningful environments:

Identity. No matter how large or complex the ritual space, users intuitively understand it as one entity. Barrie points out that one way this is achieved in design is through a consistent vocabulary, in terms of materials and architectural styles or forms. Another tool is edge definition. This may be as simple as a change of material along a path edge or the walling off of the sacred precinct. The function of this is to indicate to the user a dichotomy of space in terms of inside/outside, special/mundane, sacred/profane (Barrie, 1996, p. 38, 40, 129).

Continuity. Continuity can be thought of as the psychological counterpart to identity. While identity is about the unity of the physical space, continuity is the ability of a space (through its physical design) to create a consistent psychological/emotional experience for the user. Moods are created through the physical manipulation of the site. For example, views of the sacred center of a site are often controlled for users. The central feature (such as a temple) may be withheld from view along the path in order to create a feeling of anticipation and heighten the emotional impact when it is finally revealed at the end of the journey. Scale can also be manipulated, making a destination appear closer or farther away in order to induce a particular mood or reaction (Barrie, 1996, p. 49).

Origin. Sacred spaces usually take advantage of their origin in order to prepare users for the experience to follow.

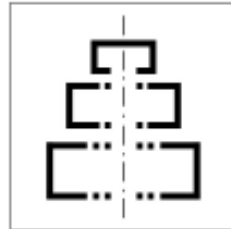
Entries often contain their own rituals, such as crossing oneself with holy water upon entry to a Catholic church. The physical space is designed to slow the user's pace and indicate entry into a different kind of space. For example, those entering a traditional Japanese meditation garden must stoop under the low entry gate. This architectural feature slows the pace of the user and also helps them assume the properly humbled attitude. Through this manipulation of space, the origin emphasizes its place as a moment a choice—a place for the individual to pause and reflect on his or her readiness to proceed (Barrie, 1996, p. 58).

Destination. The destination within a ritual site is usually the most sacred precinct of the site. Its formal features reinforce this idea. It may be larger or smaller, sited higher or lower than the other “rooms” of the site, but in all cases, its physical features distinguish it from the rest of the site. The materials used are usually consistent with those on the rest of the site but often are more elaborate (Barrie, 1996, p. 75). Barrie's notion of destination roughly corresponds to Van Gennep's reincorporation phase—it marks the point at which the individual has gained something from his ritual journey and now must return to society as a changed person. Richard Barber observes that in many cultures, individuals returning from pilgrimages (i.e., sacred journeys) enjoy a “special status” when they return to their community (Barber, 1991, p. 151).

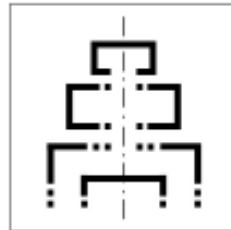
Directionality/Path. Directionality implies a quality that pulls you forward into the heart of the sacred space. This can be accomplished through a progression of increasingly sacred rooms that draw the user on. It can also be enhanced by the revealing and hiding of views along the journey. Barrie identifies

several path types, each of which uses its physical form to create a psychological impression (diagrams after Barrie, 1996).

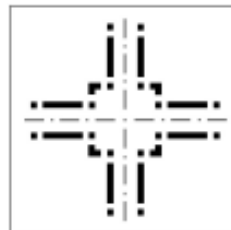
- *Axial* – A series of increasingly sacred thresholds, rooms, or events that culminate in a sacred precinct. The path is usually clearly marked (Barrie, 1996, p. 79).



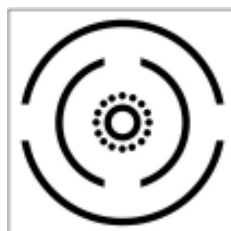
- *Split* – Such a path consists of several origins but only one sacred destination. It suggests the evolution of unity from diversity (Barrie, 1996, p. 103).



- *Radial* – Many paths lead to the sacred center. The central location of the sacred precinct emphasizes and reaffirms its power (Barrie, 1996, p. 111).

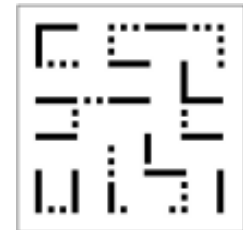


- *Circumambulating* – Such paths usually take the user around the sacred but not to it. Such a structure can serve to heighten the power of the sacred center by keeping it inaccessible (Barrie, 1996, p. 118).

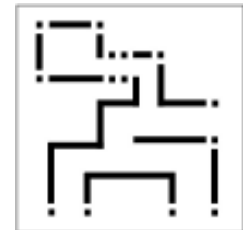


Two of the path types Barrie identifies lack the strong directionality usually found in those above. Instead, their paths are not clearly defined, and often there is no one destination. This looser structure gives the users more control over their experience of the place. They are free to interpret their experiences of the space in a more personal way.

- *Gridded* – A grid organization often lacks a clear path. Instead of a sacred center it may have multiple sacred spots. The grid does not offer the user any clues about what path to take or where the sacred “center” can be found (Barrie, 1996, p. 116).



- *Segmented* – This path is the least structured of all. It is multidirectional and encompasses a series of paths leading to the sacred center. It contains numerous thresholds, but the end is never in sight until the user arrives there. Kinesthetically, it promotes a sense of wandering and confusion, and in this way signifies more than any of the other path types the emotional and physical trials of a sacred journey (Barrie, 1996, pp. 125, 147). It acts as a physical metaphor for life as a journey or pilgrimage.



Performance Theory

In the 1970s, performance theorists began to shift the emphasis in ritual studies from their effect on society as a whole to their interaction with individual performers. As a result, the field of study was shifted from the outside observation of ritual to the perspective of the participants. Ingrid Rudie explains that the emphasis in ritual studies now focuses on “embodied experience” (Rudie, 1998, p. 118) rather than observer interpretation. As a result, additional characteristics of ritual activity, in terms of the interaction of the individual with his or her environment, were identified.

Kinesthetics. Performance theory brought a heightened emphasis to the sensations and movements of the human body in ritualized space (Bell, 1997, p. 82). As Bell states, “The body acts within an environment that appears to require it to respond in certain ways, but this environment is actually created and organized precisely by means of how people move around it” (Bell, 1997, p. 139). Barrie has observed that most paths in ritual spaces create a kinesthetic awareness of movement. This manipulation of physical movement in turn creates certain psychological moods (Barrie, 1996, p. 208). For example, a steep or winding path or one that hides views of the ultimate destination can make a journey seem longer or more difficult to the user. Designers can also encourage users to interact physically with the features of a design in order to provide a more powerful experience. In a visit to the Oklahoma City National Memorial, for example, one writer observed numerous visitors interacting with the physical environment: dipping their hands in the reflecting pool or seeing their own reflection in it, leaving their handprints on the bronze walls that mark the moments

before and after the explosion, and leaving mementoes and notes in the chain link fence (Vanhooser, 2001, p. 125). This interaction with the environment allows visitors to feel and express their connection to and solidarity with a larger community.

Framing. Framing occurs at the entry to a ritual space and at the onset of the ritual. It puts a person in the proper frame of mind to participate in the ritual (Bell, 1997, p. 160). Framing is “the way in which some activities or messages set up an interpretive framework within which to understand other subsequent or simultaneous acts or messages” (Bell, 1997, p. 74). Such framing activities would include the example of stooping through a low gate in order to enter a Japanese meditation garden. It is also important to note, as in this example, that framing often operates through the kinesthetic engagement of the visitor with the site.

Reflexivity. Reflexivity is the opportunity for self-reflection built into ritual. Bell describes this as the capacity of ritual performance to make performers “become an audience to themselves” (Bell, 1997, p. 75), as they reflect on what the ritual means to them in terms of their own beliefs and identity. Often, reflexive moments or spaces are built into rituals. For example, Barber points out that many pilgrimage traditions include the leaving of *ex votos* or small mementoes by pilgrims who reach their destination (Barber, 1991, p. 149). The leaving of these tokens (sometimes a doll, a prayer written on a scrap of paper, or even the walking stick carried on the journey) are not just forms of graffiti marking the pilgrim’s arrival. They also offer an opportunity to pause and reflect back on the journey just completed. A reflexive space could be as simple as a well-

placed bench near the exit of a ritual space or a lengthened exit path that allows for a slow transition from the sacred ritual space to the mundane world.

Indeterminacy. Although rituals tend to have strict behavior codes or scripts (rule governance as discussed above), Sally Moore points out that there is some play or maneuverability within the rules for improvisation or invention during ritual performance: “The cultural, contractual, and technical imperatives always leave gaps, require adjustments and interpretations to be applicable to particular situations, and are themselves full of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and often contradictions” (Turner, 1986, p. 78). The advantages of indeterminacy are twofold: It allows ritual participants to interpret the ritual as they see fit “in order to cultivate personally meaningful experiences” (Coleman & Elsner, 1998, p. 63), and it allows rituals to change and adapt over time to new circumstances while retaining their power. This suggests that flexibility in terms of physical design is also crucial to the longevity and success of a ritual space.

One ritual space that exhibits this flexibility or indeterminacy is the village of Walsingham, England. As a ritual complex, it suggests how design can be used to foster a ritual space open to innovation as well as to the creation of individualized meanings while still maintaining its formalism, traditionalism, and rule governance. The village of Walsingham is both a sacred site for religious pilgrims and a tourist destination. It contains a plethora of attractions for the devout and the curious alike. The town contains the ruins of a medieval Augustinian priory on the grounds of a manor house offering public tours. The ruins also mark the spot of the original “Holy House,” which legend says

a rich local woman was told to build in a vision of the Virgin Mary. The House is said to be an exact replica of Jesus’s home in Nazareth. Travelers can visit a reconstruction of this House just down the road at the Anglo-Catholic Church. Along with an additional handful of shrines and relics, the town boasts a range of pubs, tea rooms, and souvenir shops complete with glow-in-the-dark Virgins. Coleman and Elsner (1998) identify Walsingham as “a physical ‘medium’ for pilgrimage, offering various spaces for the enactment of rituals” (p. 47). With its multiple destinations, it represents, in Barrie’s terms, the segmented path type—undefined and lacking a central destination. This openness allows for more individual autonomy. While visitors can choose to engage in rule-governed rituals, such as the various church services steeped in tradition, the village also allows them to pick and choose activities and draw their own meanings from them. Coleman and Elsner (1998) indicate that the traditional religious narratives of the churches “can be subverted by pilgrims as they cut and paste their way through the village, experimenting with a variety of religious genres without necessarily endorsing any single one of them” (p. 47).

Contemporary memorial design such as the Oklahoma City National Memorial also exhibit this flexibility in terms of path and destination—and hence the meanings derived from and uses made of these spaces. In Oklahoma, users can visit the elements of the site (reflecting pool, survivor tree, museum, etc.) in any order they choose, spending as much or as little time as they feel necessary to satisfy their own personal needs. As one of the jury members for the memorial design competition stated “[The winning design] engaged the entire site as a landscape of remembrance, giving people choices about how to flow through it and ponder on the tragedy” (O’Connell, 2000, p. 72).

One of the Anglican priests in Walsingham also identified

the freedom of the village's ritual space and ritual experience as a source of its power: "It's almost like a Christian theme park, in which we set out the wares and then allow people to make of it what they will. . . . All of that I think is very, very significant, because it's the best kind of spiritual direction, which actually allows a pilgrim to find his or her own way in what God offers" (Coleman & Elsner, 1998, p. 46). Designed without a deterministic agenda, ritual centers like Walsingham and the Oklahoma City National Memorial demonstrate that flexible landscapes can accommodate a wide range of uses and meanings.

The study of ritual spaces demonstrates that through design, landscape architects manipulate not only the physical landscape but also the internal landscapes of individual users. This in turn suggests that landscape architects can encourage visitors to construct meaningful experiences of a place. The study of ritual structure provides many insights into the charac-

teristics of meaningful spaces. Performance theory emphasizes the power of kinesthetic interaction with the landscape and of the potential impact that framing a visitor's experience of a place and providing an opportunity for self-reflection can have. An open, flexible design also encourages users to attach their own meanings and significance to a site now and into the future. The study of ritual spaces also reveals design techniques that can heighten the experience of these spaces—the manipulation of views or path to create a psychological effect, the use of a consistent vocabulary of materials and architectural techniques to create a unified whole, and the articulation of origin, path, and destination.

The study of ritual demonstrates that humans' interaction with their physical environment transcends physical space to touch their minds and hearts. Such a lesson is perhaps the most valuable one for a landscape architect to learn. Indeed, the profession of landscape architecture is well-positioned to promote and facilitate this interaction.

SITE DESIGN PRECEDENTS

Critical to the construction of meaningful experience is this notion of the interaction—the conversation—between the landscape and the user. The role of a constructivist designer is to seek to understand the nature of this interaction and encourage and shape it, given the goals and intentions of the specific project. To this end, the first part of this thesis involved the articulation of a Constructivist Design Approach. This was accomplished through the derivation of a set of Design Attitudes and Design Interventions that describe both the theoretical orientation of a constructivist landscape architect as well as a set of design applications informed by those attitudes. The design interventions are not specific to any given project, but instead describe opportunities that a constructivist designer would look to incorporate into any site to encourage the interaction or engagement of the individual and the environment in order to evoke a meaningful experience. Given that constructivists accept the notion that different but equally valid meanings can be generated from engagement with the same object, the emphasis here is not on generating particular meanings, but rather on the creation of an environment that makes the generation of meaning possible by encouraging the interaction of visitor and site.

Data Analysis. In order to develop these Design Attitudes and Interventions, four existing designed environments were chosen for study that meet the stated criteria of a constructivist landscape—those encouraging the interaction of visitor and site. The purpose of this site study was to identify any recurring characteristics or qualities among the sites that would seem to

be indicative of or essential to a successful constructivist design approach. The selection of these qualities was also heavily informed by the study of the spatial structure of ritual discussed in the preceding section of this chapter. Using established methods of qualitative data analysis, the data from the sites was gradually sorted into categories or themes that addressed the research objective (see the next paragraph for a description of the data collected). Sites were analyzed one at a time, using the constant comparative method, which entails the “continuous comparison of incidents, respondents’ remarks, and so on, with each other. Units of data—bits of information—are literally sorted into groupings that have something in common” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). In other words, themes that began to emerge from the first site studied were compared with the other sites and refined or modified accordingly. These themes, as Taylor and Bogden (1984) explain, are “concepts indicated by the data (and not the data itself)” (p. 36). They “capture some recurring pattern that cuts across . . . the data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). Although identification of these themes may be seen as arbitrary by critics of qualitative research, as Merriam (1998) points out, it is also “systematic and informed by the study’s purpose, the investigator’s orientation and knowledge, and the meanings made explicit by the participants themselves” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179).

Data Sources. The four sites chosen for this analysis were the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum also in the nation’s capital, the Oklahoma City National Memorial, and Follow the North Star, an experiential Underground Railroad tour offered by the Conner Prairie Living History Museum in Fishers, Indiana. Because many readers will not be familiar with the North Star

program, a brief description follows (a brief description of all four sites can be found in Appendix A). Follow the North Star is an experiential Underground Railroad tour—experiential because it asks visitors to take on the role of escaping slaves and experience for themselves what such a journey may have been like. Participants travel in groups of 12-15 and cover about 1½ miles at night through the museum’s various outdoor environments as they interact with interpreters playing various roles, from hostile slave hunters to helpful Quakers. The tour is structured as a predetermined route through the outdoor landscape (although participants are unaware they are following an established route) punctuated by posts at which participants interact with interpreters. The complete tour, including an orientation and a closing debriefing session held in the visitor center, lasts about 90 minutes.

Data for the Holocaust Museum are based on published interviews with the architect and other commentary on the museum. Data from the Vietnam Memorial and Oklahoma City Memorial were drawn from site visits and a review of published literature. A more detailed qualitative case study was conducted of North Star, with data drawn from several informal interviews, six semi-structured interviews conducted by the author (program creator, four interpreters, six tour participants), participant observations of two tour groups, and a review of program documentation including interpreter scripts, tour brochures, and visitor evaluations.

Data analysis of these sources revealed some strong similarities in terms of design emphasis across all the sites. These common themes were then distilled into the following list of Design Attitudes and Design Interventions, which collectively make up the Constructivist Design Approach. A detailed discussion of each item follows this page.

CONSTRUCTIVIST DESIGN APPROACH

Design Attitudes

- Collaboration of Visitor and Site
- Structured But Flexible Meaning
- Physical Landscape Influences the Internal Landscape

Design Interventions

- Dislocation From the External World
 - Marking of Thresholds
 - Opportunity for Reflection
 - Control of Views
- Dramatic Rhythm
 - Juxtaposition
 - Concurrence
- Personalized Communication
 - Path as Storyline
- Physical Interaction With the Site
 - Kinesthetic Engagement
 - Sensory Engagement
 - Sensitivity to Scale and Proportion
 - Sensitivity to Materials

It is important to understand that all of these attitudes and interventions are interrelated, and their separation here, while necessary for discussion, is artificial.

Collaboration of Visitor and Site

Fundamental to a constructivist approach to design is the attitude that meaning is made through a collaboration between visitor and site. Certainly, every site has a meaning that exists independently of visitors' perceptions of the site. For example, most people would agree that the Vietnam Memorial is meant to remember and honor those who fought and died in the Vietnam War. But beyond such general meanings exhibited by a site exists a level of personalized meaning unique to each individual visitor. A Vietnam veteran, for example, would very likely respond to and interpret the Wall differently than a visitor who protested the war. It is with this level of personalized meaning that the constructivist designer is most concerned. In a discussion of his design intentions for the Holocaust Museum, architect James Ingo Freed (1994) displays this constructivist attitude: "The intent is that the building be a resonator of your own imagery. . . . You feed it and it feeds you back" (p. 450). Every individual comes to the site with a unique set of prior experiences and attitudes that shapes his or her interaction with the site and thus affects the meaning derived. In this way, meaning becomes a creative process of exchange between the site and the individual.

Architectural historian Jeffrey Ochsner (1997; drawing on the work of Richard Etlin) uses a similar metaphor to describe the process of meaning-making. He characterizes the Vietnam Memorial as a site of projection, in which individual visitors' memories and feelings are "projected onto a place" (p. 163). It is this projection that enlivens a site and gives it personal meaning to visitors (Figure 4.3). As Campbell (1983) said of the Vietnam Memorial, "No one except the designer, perhaps, had fully realized how vividly the memorial would come to life

through such interactions" (p. 150).

The critical role of visitor participation in terms of meaning is also evident in an interview with one of the interpreters in the North Star program. When asked about his ideal visitor, he described someone willing to actively immerse himself in the tour in order to derive the most meaningful experience: "I want the person who's coming out here to have a learning experience, and they want to do it all. They want to not [just] physically, but mentally get into the role." His attitude as an interpreter reflects an understanding of the connection between visitor involvement and the quality of the interpretive experience: "Try to draw them in because that's the only way they're going to get anything out of it. You've got to get them involved." Such an attitude benefits a landscape architect as much as an interpreter.

Certainly, no site will be equally meaningful to all people. To extend Freed's metaphor of the site as a resonator for personal imagery, a site will remain virtually mute and meaningless for the individual who brings little in the way of directly related or analogous experiences, attitudes, or factual knowledge. But unlike an objectivist designer, the constructivist acknowledges that he or she cannot control the imagery that individuals bring to the site nor, by extension, the meanings generated at the site. The measure of a successful site in this



Figure 4.3. Searching the book of names at the Vietnam Memorial.

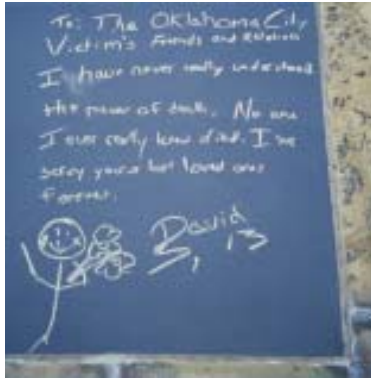


Figure 4.4. Children are invited to express their own understanding of the Oklahoma City Memorial on slate pavers in the Children's Area.

approach therefore lies not in the specific nature of the meanings generated but in the ability of the site to allow for and even invite a wide range of meanings (Figure 4.4). This contrasts strongly with objectivist designers, whose success or failure is tied to the communication of an intended meaning. For the constructivist designer, successful design entails encouraging visitors to engage with the site to generate their own meanings.

Structured But Flexible Meaning

But how does the designer work in a way that encourages visitors to engage with the site? Because the constructivist designer accepts the fact that each individual will draw on a unique reservoir of attitudes, experiences, and knowledge when interacting with the site, the ability of the site to allow for a diversity of interpretations is critical. To do this, the site must be open and flexible in its design and inherent symbolism. The site whose meaning is too controlled, too resolved—like that of a traditional monument—leaves no room for interpretation. As Ochsner (1997) says of the Vietnam Memorial, “The aspect of incompleteness is critical.” He warns that sites “must leave ‘space’ into which the projection can occur” (p. 163). In this

way, “the experience . . . is different for every individual. It does not offer a fully prepared set of images; rather, it brings from each of us our own response” (Ochsner, 1997, p. 165). Freed (1994) echoes this attitude in his discussion of the Holocaust Memorial: “The building is not symbolic. It is suggestive. . . . I’m not interested in providing you with a metaphor, and a map to the metaphor, and a sort of maze that you walk through and then say, ‘Is this the right way to see it?’” (p. 450). Instead of reading from the playbook, a site visitor must be able to fill in the blanks according to his or her own inclinations to create the most meaningful personal understanding of the site.

Abstraction. One approach Freed uses to keep his design open to visitor projection is through abstraction. In this way, the relationship between physical design forms and their meanings is less evident, thus increasing the opportunity for individuals to create new, personalized interpretations. For example, Freed sought to convey in his design something of the atmosphere of calculated control and suppression that he felt on his pre-design visits to concentration camps in Europe. Instead of employing overt symbols of the Nazi regime, one of the design elements Freed uses to convey this feeling is an abstract pattern of steel beams incorporated into the brick interior of the atrium of the museum (Figure 4.5). The reference here is to the Nazi crematoria he saw on his site



Figure 4.5. Steel beams imbedded in the brick atrium walls of the Holocaust Museum.

visits, which were constructed of brick and wrapped in metal bands. The bands were necessary to prevent the brick walls of the crematoria from cracking as they expanded from the buildup of gas caused by constant use. By abstracting these banding patterns in the design of the atrium walls, Freed alludes to this condition but never replicates it. Indeed, his association of the banding with the controlled savagery of the Nazi operations is a highly individualized meaning in and of itself, and even if visitors do comprehend the connection he is making, the metaphor is not so exclusive or so apparent as to rule out other interpretations. The lack of resolution in this form encourages visitors to engage with the site as they speculate on the meaning of the steel beams. As Freed (1993) says, the design is “sufficiently ambiguous and open-ended so that others can inhabit the space, can imbue the forms with their own memories” (p. 92) and their own meanings.

The contrast between abstract and literal, over-determined design elements is visible within the Vietnam Memorial. The ambiguity and incompleteness of the abstract symbol of the wall itself invites the visitor to speculate, whereas the figurative sculpture of the three soldiers later added to the memorial are complete and self-contained in their literalness (Figure 4.6). The correlation between the physical form of the sculpture and its meaning is obvious. As Ochsner (1997) says of the sculptures, “Although their realism may trigger memories for a few who visit, for most the sculptures themselves are impenetrable. In their completeness, they do not engender psychological investment on the part of the viewer” (p. 166). The ambiguity in the design of the Wall itself, however, invites projection and interpretation. Just as the skilled storyteller gets his audience to lean in and attend more closely to his words by lowering the volume of his voice, the quiet understatement of the design draws

visitors into it. Only a flexible space—one open to projection and interpretation—encourages the interaction of the site and visitor in the meaning-making process.

Although the constructivist site is open to interpretation, it is important to remember that constructivists also acknowledge that there are inherent meanings residing in a site and its features, in the form of the designer’s concept and intentions. In this way, the guiding hand of the designer provides an overall structure in terms of the meaning of the site. It is this acknowledgement of the inherent meanings of a site that distinguishes constructivist designers from subjectivists, who believe meaning resides solely with the observer and not in the site. Freed (1993) touched on the importance of embodying the designer’s meanings in the site when discussing the research he conducted before beginning his design work, including talking to Holocaust survivors: “Everybody I talked to has reconstructed a different memory of the event. I as the architect reconstruct yet another memory that never was, but it can act as a resonator for the memories of others” (p. 93). The designer’s voice is the other half of the dialogue in the conversation between visitor and site and, as Freed says, can be used to enrich the visitor’s experience of the site. Much of the personal memory Freed constructed emerged out of what he acknowledged as deeply moving visits to the



Figure 4.6. The figurative statue of American soldiers was a later addition to the Vietnam Memorial.

death camps. Design concepts emerged from the aspects of his visits he found most powerful. For example, he was struck with how “meticulously engineered” (Russell, 1988, p. 66) and efficient the camps and especially the crematoria were. The almost loving attention to detail in their construction contrasted sharply with their function as death chambers. This meaning constructed by Freed was translated into a design intent to create a cold, efficient, factory-like atmosphere in the museum through his choice of industrial materials such as brick exposed steel beams. His use of steel bands in the brick mentioned earlier also emerged from this sensitivity to the Nazi construction methods he observed. The designer’s meanings and design concepts, abstractly embodied in the building, provide fodder for visitors’ meanings.

Although ambiguity is essential to encourage the visitor to participate in the production of meaning, the structure provided by the designer is equally necessary. Freed (1993) expresses this tension between structure and flexibility in this way: “The objective was to make it cohere without being explicit, without being one thing” (p. 93). Indeed, part of the potential richness of meaning on a site comes from the visitor’s freedom to play off the meanings a designer has built into a site. Moore describes a similarly intimate connection between structure and flexibility inherent in ritual activity: “The cultural, contractual, and technical imperatives always leave gaps, require adjustments and interpretations to be applicable to particular situations, and are themselves full of ambiguities, inconsistencies, and often contradictions” (Turner, 1986, p. 78).

In an aspect of ritual performance that Schechner (1993) refers to as “deconstruction-reconstruction” (p. 40), individuals use the meanings they read in a site and its associated ritual as muses for the generation of their own meanings. They

deconstruct the site and the designer’s intentions and meanings in order to construct their own. In this way, experiences of a site become more personally meaningful to each visitor.

This process of deconstruction-reconstruction is evident in many of the North Star participants. According to tour co-creator Michelle Evans, North Star is one of Conner Prairie’s more tightly structured programs in terms of the adherence to a preset physical route and plotline. Despite their efforts at maintaining a structured experience, however, Evans admits that visitors frequently construct alternative meanings and consequently react in unpredictable ways that threaten the tour’s structure. For example, at one point along the tour, participants must travel down a linear path bounded on one side by a cornfield and by a forested slope on the other as they flee from a poor white farmer hoping to supplement his meager income by selling them to a slave trader (Figure 4.7). Tour staff assumed that this landscape condition would be intuitively read by tour participants as an obvious pathway between the two vertical “walls” created by the mature cornfield and wooded slope. Staff found, however, that for some visitors, their past experiences shaped a different understanding of this physical condition. For them, the cornfield meant a safe hiding place.



Figure 4.7. North Star participants are meant to run down the path between the forested slope and the cornfield.

Mary (all visitor names are pseudonyms), a fourth-grade teacher from northern Indiana, summed it up in an interview after her tour: “I was the one who wanted to go in the cornfield. I thought it was a pretty darn good idea. I hid for a long time from my mom and dad in these things. I know it works.” Mary is not the only participant whose prior experiences and unique understanding of the world has influenced her behavior on the tour. Indeed, on at least one occasion, staff have been forced to stop the tour in order to search for individuals hiding in the cornfield.

North Star staff continually try to balance the tension between flexibility and structure as they encourage participants to react freely and make the tour experience personally meaningful while still keeping the tours running on track and on schedule. Instead of fencing off the field or creating another physical barrier that would overtly limit visitors’ freedom of movement, staff have tried to reinforce the tour structure in more subtle ways. For example, they found that participants tended to “bolt” when referred to in the orientation as “runaway slaves.” Staff found that when they simply replaced this term with the less suggestive “fugitive slaves,” the incidents of tour participants spontaneously running away were reduced. They also began to use group plants (museum staff posing as tour participants) to keep groups from running away through such subtle devices as faking a twisted ankle. Evans sums up the staff’s wrestling with the balance between structure and flexibility: “We are definitely guiding groups through the program. But we want the groups to feel like they’re having to listen to directions [and deciding for themselves the route to take].” Such a balancing act is hard to maintain, as North Star shows, but the rewards of the struggle, in terms of the capacity for collaboration between visitor and site, are worth it.

Physical Landscape Influences the Internal Landscape

As discussed earlier in this chapter, ritual—whether a wedding ceremony or a visit to a park—inhabits both physical and psychological space. One of the keys to understanding the power and efficacy of ritual is to remember that the physical journey made by a participant is designed to parallel his or her psychological and emotional journey. The physical setting of a ritual is used to evoke or strengthen an internal reaction. In this way, a constant dialogue exists between the emotional/psychological environment of the individual and his or her physical surroundings. As Barrie (1996) explains, ritual is “the symbolic narrative facilitated by the architectural setting of path and place” (p. 73). Because of this, a landscape architect has the opportunity to create a space that “facilitates our interior journeys” (Stein, 1996, n.p.), as well as our physical ones.

For example, the descent on the stairway from the third to the second floor of the Holocaust Museum is designed to facilitate a change in the interior landscapes of visitors as they enter the portion of the museum that interprets the Death Marches. At this point, the brutality of the exhibit’s subject matter increases. To help evoke a sense of what is to come, the physical environment changes in a way that sympathizes with the tenor of the story at this point. Freed narrowed the stairway width to constrict movement, changed the materials to unpainted steel, and dimmed the lighting. The physical space becomes harsher, thus priming visitors for the experiences to come and heightening the effects of the Death March exhibit. As Howett (1997) explains, the visitor is both “physically and psychologically responding to [the] building” (p. 97). In North

Star, the designers' choice of a physically demanding path reflected their understanding that physical stress could heighten the emotional stress of the tour. As Evans says, "We make use of the hill as I said to add that physical stress. Obviously, we're not going to beat anybody up as they go through the program, but we can push some buttons by adding that kind of stress." By understanding the close connection between physical and psychological experiences and looking for opportunities to apply it, constructivist designers can create more powerful and potentially more meaningful places.

Dislocation From the External World

Marking of Thresholds. Part of the power and impact of ritualized space lies in the fact that it is distinguished in some fashion from the space of the ordinary, everyday world. This condition gives events inside the ritual site an added significance. Its separation from profane space signifies its sacred nature. As Heidegger (1971) observes, "A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*" (p. 154). The nature of experiences inside this sacred territory is understood to differ drastically from those outside. In each of the case studies, the boundaries or thresholds of the physical site—their points of entry and exit—are articulated or emphasized in some way to signal to visitors their separateness.

Bell (1997) defines the tendency to articulate the entry to ritual space as *framing* or "the way in which some activities or messages set up an interpretive framework within which to understand other subsequent or simultaneous acts or messages"

(p. 74; see Ritual Theory in this chapter). Freed (1993) speaks of the entry into the Holocaust Museum atrium through a false façade as such a framing experience: "We disorient you, shifting and recentering you . . . to separate you emotionally as well as visually from Washington" (p. 93). He describes a linear glass block incision (Figure 4.8) running the length of the granite floor of the atrium at a 13° angle.

Just as a groom carries his bride over the threshold to mark the beginning of a new domestic life, crossing this fissure to enter the museum space signifies a new condition, in terms of both space and experience. The "grid shifts" (Freed, 1993, p. 93) at the threshold as visitors are jolted into reorienting themselves according to the angle of the slot and the parallel skylight overhead. In this way, the structure of the physical environment sets up a framework of uneasiness. One gets the sense already that something is askew inside.

The Oklahoma City Memorial also marks the thresholds of the site, this time with large bronze gates (Figure 4.9). To reinforce the separation of the sacred space of the memorial from the profane space of the adjoining streets, the gates are engraved with the time one moment before the bomb blast and one moment after. In this way, the gates mark not only a sacred



Figure 4.8. Illuminated glass block slot (right side of photo) in Hall of Witness floor, running at an angle to the rectangular walls of the space.

physical space but also a sacred moment in time. This moment of transition at the threshold allows individuals to prepare themselves for the experience to come, and designers who want to encourage visitors to make the most of their experience of a site should strive to create these types of framing elements.



Figure 4.9. Gate marking the threshold between public street and sacred space at the Oklahoma City Memorial.

Opportunity for Reflection. Exit from a site also marks a moment for reflection before returning to the everyday world. Identifying this characteristic of ritual as *reflexivity*, Bell (1997) describes this as the capacity of ritual performance to make performers “become an audience to themselves” (p. 75), as they are given the opportunity to reflect on what the ritual means to them in terms of their beliefs and identity. Reflexivity can occur at any time or place within ritual space (or can be ongoing), but the exit offers a prime opportunity. Freed provided a physical space for reflection in the Holocaust Museum with the Hall of Remembrance (Figure 4.10). At the conclusion of the exhibits, visitors are channeled through a one-story hallway from which they can enter this final room. Here, the sense of spatial enclosure used elsewhere in the museum to evoke a sense of oppression and confinement gives way to a large open space. Likewise, the light-colored Jerusalem stone softly glowing in the

sunlight let in through the skylights contrasts with the dimly lit industrial brick and steel in the rest of the museum. Whereas the rest of the museum unsettles visitors, the Hall of Remembrance “is a place for contemplation, a quiet place” (Freed, 1993, p. 93). Seating is available on the steps leading down to a central chamber, and the perimeter wall contains niches for people wishing to light memorial candles.

A dramatic change of physical surroundings that facilitates reflection also marks the conclusion of the outdoor tour at North Star, as participants are brought back inside the visitor center for a debriefing session in which they can ask questions or simply talk about their experiences and reactions on the tour. Evans describes this period as “just time to come back down to earth” before they leave. The physical change in setting represents a drastic change from the conditions of the tour. As they enter the building, visitors step out of a 19th century world in which they are slaves running for freedom to the modern world and their true identities. In contrast to the dark, cold outdoors, the debriefing room is well-lit and warm, and visitors have the opportunity to sit down and have hot chocolate and cookies. Interpreters traditionally



Figure 4.10. The soft glow created by lighting and materials in the Holocaust Museum's Hall of Remembrance invites quiet reflection.

attend the last debriefing session of the evening while still in costume. In addition to hearing visitor feedback, many interpreters—especially those playing abusive characters—also want visitors to “see that they’re real people, that this is not their own attitude that they saw out there that night,” as Evans says. The debriefing provides the opportunity for closure, for reflection upon the meaning of the experience—for visitors and interpreters alike. This period of reflection cushions the return to the everyday world, but also gives visitors the opportunity to begin integrating the lessons they learned during the program into their everyday existence.

Control of Views. Another way that each case studied reinforces the separation of the site from the everyday world is through the manipulation of views within and off the site. For example, the Vietnam Memorial consciously maintains a visual connection to the external world through its axial alignment with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial (Figure 4.11). The connection to these nationally prominent sites reinforces the sacred nature of the Wall, elevating its significance in the national psyche through this visual association. Given the history of the U.S. public’s reaction to the Vietnam War, such an association was probably critical to maintain. Although the Lincoln Memorial is largely blocked by the tree line in the growing season, hints of it can still be made out—enough to suggest its presence. At the meeting point of the two retaining walls—the lowest point on the site—the views to the neighboring monuments are maintained but take on a more ephemeral presence as reflections on the marble surfaces of the Wall. At this moment, the presence of these neighboring symbols of national pride become background to the more than 58,000 names of the dead engraved on the Wall. This orchestra-

tion of views off the site has “allowed the incorporation of those other structures in the design” (Ochsner, 1997, p. 159) while still creating a separate, sacred space in which to interact with the memorial.

As Campbell (1983) describes it, “In making this descent [to the corner] you feel you’re entering a cloistered space, set off from the busy surroundings. Streets and skylines disappear to leave you alone with the wall and its names. Then, as you pass the angle and begin to climb, you feel yourself emerging again into the world of noise and light after a meditative experience” (p. 150). The visual connection to the world beyond the site grows stronger as the visitor begins to exit the memorial.

Whereas maintaining the views off the site was important at the Vietnam Memorial, both the North Star designers and Freed felt it critical to withhold views off of the site in order to strengthen the immersion in the experience. North Star has placed their route in a section of their property that offers minimal views of the modern world. As one of the interpreters says, “You want to give them all the different experiences of being isolated from the modern world. That’s the whole thing. You don’t want any kind of city lights, lights from your buildings—anything that would interfere with that experience.” Freed, too, fought the Holocaust Museum Board to prevent



Figure 4.11. View from the Vietnam Memorial to the Washington Monument.



Figure 4.12. The view of Washington D.C. through this window is deliberately restricted to stress visitors' separation from the real world while at the Holocaust Museum.

views to the Mall from the Hall of Remembrance. Believing that allowing views of the monuments of Washington D.C.—symbols of freedom and democracy—from inside the hall was surrendering to the desire for a comfortable ending to the experience, Freed's original design called for the windows of the hall to be bricked up. In a compromise (Figure 4.12), the windows are partially blocked by stone slabs. The fragmentary nature of the view is frustrating rather than comforting.

Indeed, it emphasizes one's

separation from the outside world rather than a connection to it. Like thresholds and spaces for reflection, control of views reinforces the special nature of a site and allows a designer to more effectively create meaningful, powerful spaces.

Dramatic Rhythm

Inside the boundary of ritual space, its identity as a place apart is reinforced by the dramatic rhythm created through its architecture. This rhythm, whether slow or fast, somber or playful, is conveyed through any number of physical aspects of the site, including variations in the material palette, the slope of the path, or spatial enclosure. Whatever its particular form of

expression, the rhythm of the ritual site uses the arrangement or sequencing of the physical features of the site to evoke a psychological or emotional reaction in ritual participants. Just as a writer chooses words and arranges phrases in a way that heightens the drama of a story, the study of ritual space demonstrates that a landscape architect can select and sequence physical materials and spatial conditions in a way that evokes desired moods or expectations. Two of the primary methods used to establish this dramatic rhythm are juxtaposition and concurrence.

Juxtaposition. This technique alternates opposing spatial and psychological conditions to create tension. It may force visitors to pay closer attention to their experience because of its lack of predictability or it may simply serve to accentuate the impact of the alternating physical and emotional conditions. The Holocaust Museum, for example (Figure 4.13), is orchestrated psychologically as a series of emotionally intense exhibits juxtaposed with transition zones that offer a moment of respite. This rhythm is presented architecturally through a series of exhibit rooms connected by transitional hallways or bridges. This physical structure (Figure

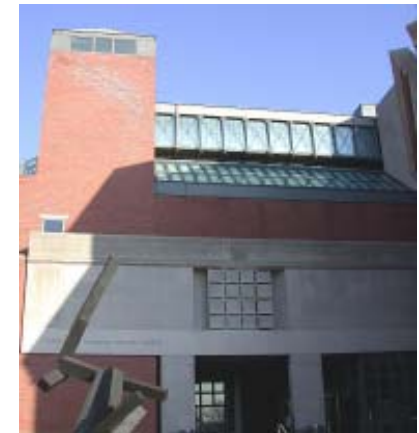


Figure 4.13. Glass bridges (upper row of windows) connect exhibit areas in the Holocaust Museum and provide a moment of relief.

4.14) encourages an alternating rhythm of emotional intensity and relief by offering large, visually dense exhibit spaces through which visitors move at a slow, somber pace juxtaposed by linear

hallways with sparse visual information that funnel people through at a faster pace. In this way, the physical organization of the exhibit space supports its experiential objectives. As architectural critic Adrian Dannatt says, these transitional bridges offer “relief from the pressures of history on either side and of sadness at the tale that continues before and after” (Linenthal, 1994, p. 408). But he goes on to add that they do not offer complete respite: “It is also only from these bridges that the full crookedness and distorted proportions of the main hall below can be understood . . . as a distorted, ruptured structure, just as the classical foundations of fascist society seen from the overview of history appear as barbarism, insanity, chaos.” In essence, the impact of each exhibit is heightened by its juxtaposition with the relative ease of these transitional spaces.

This use of the juxtaposition of emotional and physical space to produce a unified dramatic rhythm on the site is also evident in North Star, which is set up similarly to the Holocaust Museum on a conceptual level, as a series of posts at which participants interact with interpreters (equivalent to the exhibits) separated by periods of transition as groups move across the landscape. As in the Holocaust Museum, the transition periods offer a measure of relief from the intensity of interac-



Figure 4.14. Diagrammatic representation of rhythmic juxtaposition of exhibit rooms and transitional spaces. This rhythm also suggests Barrie's ritual structure (see Figure 4.2).

tions with slave hunters and other potentially dangerous characters. Evans likens the dramatic rhythm of the tour to a rollercoaster, saying, “We’ve had people say it needs to be more intense the whole time. And I think it’s like a rollercoaster, in that if it’s all downhill, it loses the impact.” Juxtaposition not only creates a coherent rhythm to the experience but also brings visitors’ attention into the experience as they continually anticipate and react to changing conditions.

Concurrence. Although the transitional spaces in both the Holocaust Museum and North Star offer some relief, tour designers have designed them to be anything but relaxed. They have used the technique of concurrence to heighten the emotional impact of by layering or overlapping elements in time and space to heighten the emotional impact of the experience. At North Star, for example, tour designers have layered the physical elements of the experience of fleeing through the landscape in a way that heightens visitors’ feelings. One tour participant named “going up the hill [to the Quaker house]. . . . The hill—at a small jog,” as one of the most powerful moments on the tour in terms of her sense of fear and lack of control of her environment. Like a sound technician layering in various instruments on a soundtrack to increase its richness, North Star designers modulate the intensity and tenor of experience by layering such elements as rate of travel, difficulty of terrain, and slope to greater or lesser extents.

Layering is also used to heighten the emotional impact of the Wall as the names are simultaneously understood by visitors at two different scales: “It is the simultaneity of the realization that there is not just a single name, but that there are so many of them. The experience of incomprehensibility of the immense number of names against which the individuality of each is

suddenly perceived is difficult to describe” (Ochsner, 1997, p. 161). Individually, these two scales carry their own emotional weight. But layered together, their power is magnified. As these sites show, the constructivist designer can support the dramatic rhythm of the experience through his manipulation of the physical environment.

Personalized Communication

Contrary to traditional monuments, all of the sites studied seek to communicate with visitors on a personal level. The individual visitor is given the opportunity to relate to the events memorialized at each site through the memories, stories, or personal belongings of the individuals who experienced them, rather than through objective factual descriptions or, as is the case with traditional monuments, through the display of universal values and symbols. Death, sacrifice, fear, freedom—whatever the focus of the site—becomes personalized and therefore more easily understood against the context of the viewer’s own life and circumstances. In essence, the historical or situational distance between the site visitor and the individuals memorialized or described contracts. The most obvious example of this may be the use of names at the Vietnam Memorial (Figure 4.15) to personalize the cost of war. The paved path running the length of the memorial (10 feet at its



Figure 4.15. Names of the dead and missing engraved on the Wall. (National Park Service, 2002)

widest point at the corner of the walls) keeps visitors within reading distance of the individual names. It does not allow an impersonal distance. In addition, as Ochsner (1997) points out, “the names have been described as ‘quirky, as names often are,’ and it may be this quirkiness that is the first thing that catches our attention as we walk along. . . . This moment of ‘recognition’ is a moment when the individuality of the names becomes ‘real’ to us” (p. 161).

The Holocaust Museum also seeks to put individual faces and names to the Holocaust: “The design team was determined to personalize the Holocaust, since it wanted visitors to eschew forever the role of bystander. This, they believed, could best be accomplished through a painful link with the faces of Holocaust victims” (Linenthal, 1994, p. 410). One result of this approach is the “tower of faces” exhibit, which presents pre-War photographs of Jews from a town in Lithuania (Figure 4.16). Most of those pictured were later killed by the Nazis and buried in a mass grave near the town. Freed’s original building design was

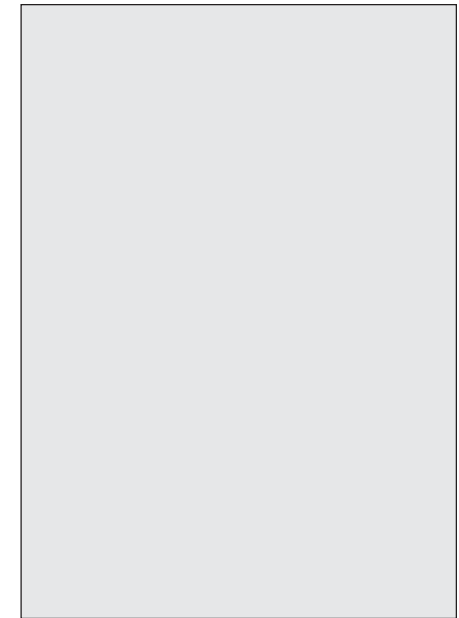


Figure 4.16. The tower of faces exhibit personalizes the Holocaust. (Weinberg & Elieli, 1995)

modified to make a three-story tower in a corner of the building to display the photographs. Visitors enter the tower at three different floors to see a space crammed with framed portraits. The visual effect is like a thousand voices calling out at once. The visitors, aware of the fate of those pictured, see them as happy, healthy individuals in their everyday lives rather than as faceless victims. In the photos, they are just like us. Allowing visitors to connect with the victims of the Holocaust on such a personal level makes the experience all the more profound.

Path As Storyline. This personal level of communication is also conveyed through the convention of path as storyline. In each case studied, the physical path of visitors represents the flow of narrative. In North Star, participants are most obviously involved in a story that unfolds for them as they continue their physical journey (Figure 4.17). Much of the exhibit space in the Holocaust Museum and the museum located at the Oklahoma City Memorial is set up as a chronological narrative of events. Even at the Vietnam Memorial, the names are listed chronologically by order of death, rather than in the traditional listing by rank or military unit. In this way, as Ochsner (1997) points out, to walk the physical path along the Wall is also to travel through time. This preference for a narrative structure reflects a desire to personalize historical events—to humanize what may otherwise be perceived of as the cold facts of history. Whereas thematic or other nonlinear presentations tend to invite intellectual speculation, narrative offers the potential of evoking a more intimate response from site visitors.

This power of narrative was understood by the exhibit designers at the Holocaust Museum: “A well-constructed narrative exhibition affects visitors not only intellectually but also emotionally; it arouses processes of identification. Visitors

project themselves into the story and thus experience it like insiders while at the same time remaining at a distance, with the intellectual perspective of outsiders” (Weinberg & Elieli, 1995, p. 49).

But why does the narrative form have such power? Communication theorist Walter Fisher (1987) suggests

that narrative is the structuring device through which human beings generate meaning. He theorizes that individuals experience and process their life events as a series of ongoing narratives that are continually reviewed and rewritten in order to construct a coherent, ever-evolving life narrative. Thus, by communicating through narrative, constructivist sites present information in the most favorable format for generating personalized meanings. The narrative presented by the site intertwines with the life narratives of each visitor, who in turn, generate new narratives. Ritual processions through the landscape likewise are often tied to narratives in the form of reenactments of events in the life of a sacred or heroic figure or event. As Rapport (1998) says of ritual performance in general, “It is through narrational performance that we maintain conscious selves; through the performance of narratives, we continue to write and rewrite the story of our selves” (p. 180). By overlaying temporal narratives onto physical paths, constructivist sites



Figure 4.17. North Star participants pause to get directions from a freeman for the next leg of their journey. (Conner Prairie brochure, 2001)

enhance the potential of the physical passage through the site to engage the visitor in more personally meaningful ways. Or, as the exhibit designers at the Holocaust Museum explain it, visitors “walk through the exhibition galleries as if walking through a three-dimensionally presented oral history whose meaning transcends the original historical limitations of time and space” (Weinberg & Elieli, 1995, p. 49).

Physical Interaction with the Site

One outcome of the objectivist approach to design has been the privileging of vision over the other senses as the primary channel of communication between user and site. Visitors are called on to read physical objects and architectural design elements like symbols on a billboard to derive meaning. But reliance on the visual has tended to make visitors merely observers of rather than participants in the site, and as Frampton (1983) points out, one of the strengths of engaging the rest of the body in the meaning-making process is that it requires individuals to experience the site, not just observe it: “The liberative importance of the tactile resides in the fact that it can only be decoded in terms of *experience* itself: it cannot be reduced to mere information, to representation or to the simple evocation of a simulacrum substituting for absent presences” (p. 28).

A constructivist approach to design engages multiple senses and the movement of the body itself in the production of meaning. It seeks to connect the site with the user on all levels, not just the visual. This approach is echoed in Freed’s (1993) comments on the Holocaust Memorial design: “I was working with the idea of a visceral memory, visceral as well as visual. I

would be very unhappy if it turned out to be entirely visual because then it would be scenographic, and then it would become a display” (p. 93). Engaging all the senses and the body with the site allows the visitor to truly feel and experience rather than watch it. It provides an embodied experience.

Kinesthetic Engagement. Performance theory has heightened the emphasis on the importance of the body’s movement in ritual space as a method of creating meaning: “The most subtle and central quality of those actions we tend to call ritual is the primacy of the body moving about within a specially constructed space, simultaneously defining (imposing) and experiencing (receiving) the values ordering the environment” (Bell, 1997, p. 82). Through this physical give and take between visitor and site, meaning is constructed. Landscape architect James Corner (1991) similarly stresses the importance of embodied experience: “Things and places can be properly understood only through nearness and intimacy, through bodily participation” (p. 127). And certainly, participants in North Star construct meaning of the fugitive slave’s experience through their kinetic interaction with the landscape. Many of the participants interviewed talked about the sense of danger they felt traveling over rough terrain in the dark. In interviews after their



Figure 4.18. The rough paths at North Star can be treacherous in the dark.

tour, they specifically mentioned such elements as the rocky terrain, tree branches hitting them in the face as they ran through the woods, and tree roots sticking up (Figure 4.18). The physical difficulties this caused in terms of stumbling and tripping reinforced an understanding of the dangers fugitive slaves dealt with on a constant basis. A twisted ankle meant almost certain recapture (and punishment) for a runaway. Rather than just reading about the difficulties, participants literally felt them in their own bodies. One of the interpreters for North Star talked about the difference between this tour and typical historical presentations of the Underground Railroad: “We had the movie version—or I did—that you see. But actually doing it and working with it, you see it a little bit different.”

The Holocaust Museum also seeks to activate a kinetic understanding in visitors. One exhibit features a cattle car used to carry Jews to the concentration camps. Rather than putting

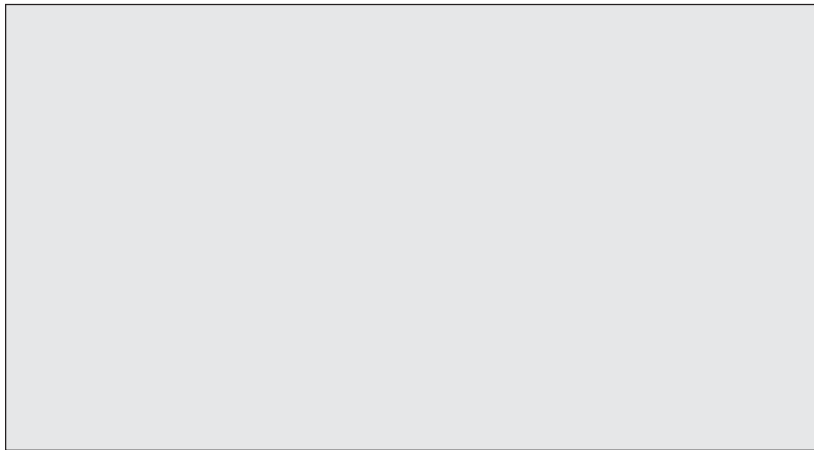


Figure 4.19. Visitors are encouraged to walk through a railroad car used to transport Jews to the concentration camps. (Weinberg & Elieli, 1995)

the car behind glass, the exhibit path takes visitors through the car. They are invited to feel the space—its enclosure, its proportions, its smell, the sound of their own footsteps inside it (Figure 4.19). Such a visceral experience goes well beyond the understanding that observation alone can communicate.

Sensory Engagement. In addition to sight, the other senses also provide avenues for connection to a site and thus the construction of meaning. Frampton (1983) stresses the “tactile resilience of the place-form and the capacity of the body to read the environment in terms other than those of sight alone” (p. 28). He goes on to list some of “the sensory perceptions which are registered by the labile body: the intensity of light, darkness, heat and cold; the feeling of humidity; the aroma of material . . .” (p. 28). One writer observed numerous visitors connecting with the Oklahoma City Memorial through the sense of touch: dipping their hands in the reflecting pool, leaving their handprints on the bronze gates that mark the entrances to the site (Vanhooser, 2001, p. 125; Figure 4.20). Similarly, at the Vietnam Memorial, many people are not content to look at the wall but also feel compelled to touch the names or take rubbings of them. North Star participants feel the coldness of the night air, hear the



Figure 4.20. Handprints on a bronze-clad entry gate at the Oklahoma City Memorial.

coyotes howling on the prairie, and smell the wood fires burning in the log cabins. Their ability to move through the landscape unheard is often threatened by the sound of their footsteps on gravel or fallen leaves. Engaging all the senses in this way facilitates a connection with the site and the potential for more powerful meanings.

Sensitivity to Scale and Proportion

Scale and proportion—the individual’s spatial relationship to his physical environment—also stimulate collaborative meaning-making. In North Star, the varying proportions of the individual to the environment reinforce the psychological state tour designers are trying to create. One of the interpreters described her reaction to finding herself in the expansive flatness of the prairie on her first tour: “I remember that feeling [of being vulnerable] down on the prairie last year, and I just felt so tiny because there’s just nothing but space out there.” This sense of vulnerability is an important aspect of the runaway slave experience to convey. Freed also plays with proportion to make visitors uncomfortable as they start their journey through the museum. He purposefully made the elevators that travel up

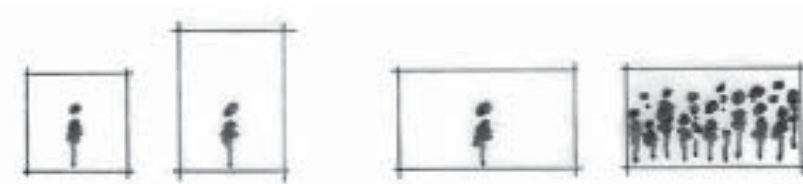


Figure 4.21. Manipulating the scale of rooms in relation to the human body is one way designers can influence the internal states of visitors.

to the fifth floor, where the exhibits begin, small so that visitors feel cramped in and confined (Figure 4.21). By manipulating the spatial relationship of the individual to the landscape in this way, visitors are put in the mood for what they are about to experience. A designer sensitive to scale and proportion can create opportunities to heighten individuals’ reactions to and involvement with a site.

Sensitivity to Materials

The appropriate choice of materials can also make a user’s experience of a site more vivid and meaningful. One of the most striking examples of this is the choice of polished black granite for the Wall. It provides a highly reflective surface that



Figure 4.22. The highly reflective—and interactive—surface of the Wall.

draws visitors into the wall. As Ochsner (1997) says, “In facing the wall directly, we see ourselves reflected back in the polished surface. . . . The simultaneity of vision of the names of the dead and missing, first with images of unknown others and then with ourselves, could not be more direct in establishing an interpersonal connection” (p. 164; Figure 4.22). A wealth of personal meanings can be read into this condition of the site—a condition that would not have existed if another material had been



Figure 4.23. The glass, steel, and brick materials pallet of the Holocaust Museum.

chosen.

Freed's materials vocabulary of "glass and steel and stone" (Linenthal, 1994, p. 408) throughout the Holocaust Museum evokes a mood of coldness and soulless efficiency for visitors (Figure 4.23). As Freed (1994) says, "The use of red brick throughout the con-

course wall is pleasing, it's tactile, and it eventually is disturbing, because it evokes the simple brick walls of the concentration camp" (p. 452). Another striking use of materials at the Holocaust Museum is the wooden bridge in the Warsaw Ghetto exhibit (Figure 4.24). The bridge adjoins a photographic mural depicting one of the bridges built over the ghetto by the Nazis. By extending the materials and design of the bridge depicted in

the photo into the third dimension, visitors are brought into the scene. Through the use of contextually appropriate materials, they are invited to walk in the shoes of the Nazis who did not want to "contaminate" themselves by walking among the Jews below. This sensitive use of materials can pull visitors into the physical and psychological composition of a site and serves as fertile ground for the creation of meaning.

With the articulation of the Constructivist Design Approach completed, the next step is to explore how such an approach might fit within and enhance the work of historical site interpretation.

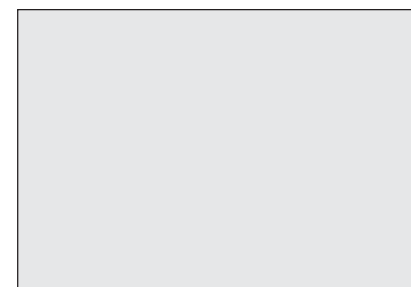


Figure 4.24. Warsaw Ghetto exhibit at the Holocaust Museum extends the wall mural out into physical space through the sensitive use of materials. (Weinberg & Elieli, 1995)

5

SELECTING AN INTERPRETIVE APPROACH

HISTORICAL SITE INTERPRETATION: THEORY AND PRACTICE

In order to apply the Constructivist Design Approach to historical site interpretation, an understanding of the trends and practices in the field must be developed. Only with this foundation can an interpretive practice be selected that best suits a constructivist approach to design.

Like monument design and ritual studies, the field of historic interpretation, both in terms of professional historians and the interpretive programming offered to the public at historic sites, has also seen a gradual shift from an objectivist approach to history to a more constructivist one. Before this shift, professional historians saw the historical narrative as the objective description of the objective facts of the past. As Novick explains it, “Whatever patterns exist in history are ‘found’ not ‘made’ ” (Bunzl, 1997, p. 2). The authority of the historical narrative came not from the individual voice of the historian (the narrator) but from the close correspondence of the narrative with the historical facts themselves. In essence, the historian was merely the observer and reporter of the historical record. As the subject in an objectivist model, his presence did not affect the inherent reality of the facts. As Novick observes, historians of the objectivist ilk accepted “a sharp separation between knower and known. . . . Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation” (Bunzl, 1997, p. 1-2). Discrepancies stemmed from bad reporting, as accuracy was a matter of satisfying the positivist construct of internal validity or “how [well] research findings match reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 201). As Novak puts it, “Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different

significance to events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging” (Bunzl, 1997, p. 2). Just as traditional monument designers were relegated to little more than decoders of architectural symbols, the objectivist approach minimized historians’ potential as active agents in the construction of a meaningful historical record.

Emergence of a Constructivist Orientation

Over the past several decades, however, the epistemological approach to history and historical meaning has shifted to a more constructivist framework. Such an approach questions the existence of objective historical meanings independent of the historian. As Bunzl (1997) says, “There is no history without interpretation” (p. 6). The narrator’s voice cannot be separated from the narrative; historian and historical record collaborate in the production of historical meaning. White (1973) places the roots of this shift in orientation as early as the close of the nineteenth century, as the attempt to fashion historical analysis into an objective, quasi-scientific field was abandoned by many historians for a more subjective stance that allowed for multiple historical narratives—multiple perspectives—to exist simultaneously. The role of the narrator in the generation of the narrative was acknowledged. The partnership of the narrator and narrative—subject and object—was becoming apparent.

A corresponding shift to a constructivist approach was seen in the field of popular historic site interpretation. The revisioning of the historical narrative as a collaboration between historian and the historical record suggested that the general public might also engage in the same process. The result was the emergence of what was often referred to as “the people’s

history” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 4), the demystifying of the historical narrative that opened access to non-historians. In effect, everyone was a historian.

Complementing the emergence of this new view of history came a refocusing of the interpretive emphasis at many sites. Museums, historical sites, and other interpretive sites that had previously focused on the collection and display of artifacts (i.e., physical evidence of the narrative), now began to turn their attention to encouraging visitors to interact with exhibits and thus develop their own narratives. As Franco (1994) says, “Thirty years ago most history museums were still engaged in the nineteenth-century fervor to collect and classify in spite of mission statements that include both collection and interpretation. . . . As museums move toward a greater emphasis on communication, there has been a noticeable shift in the structure of museum education programs [in order] to ensure that exhibits become learning environments with greater opportunities for self-directed learning experiences that address visitors’ emotions as well as their minds” (p. 156). The shift in interpretation from objective meaning to a constructivist stance meant a focusing of attention on how people learned and made meaning of history.

Reinforcing the efficacy of this shift to a more constructivist stance in the presentation of history was the results of research into how the general public used history and the meanings it held. Like performance theorists in ritual studies, they began to turn their focus to the individual and his or her personal relationship with history. Amid cries from holdouts in academia that the public no longer knew or cared about history, a national survey project conducted by a team of researchers in the early 1990s showed that far from not finding history relevant, citizens felt “the past was pervasive, a natural

part of everyday life, central to any effort to live in the present” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 6). The problem, as indicated by the survey results, was not a lack of interest in the past but a failure in the methods of communication. Researchers found that most people sought to make meaning out of the broader brush strokes of history by filtering them through their own personal experiences. They wanted to understand how history was personally relevant to them. As Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) describe it, individuals sought to use “a dialogue between the past and the present to answer pressing current-day questions about relationships, identity, immortality, and agency” (p. 178). In essence, they used the past to inform their present lives. Many respondents “found fault with a school-based history organized around the memorization of facts and locked into a prescribed textbook curriculum.” Instead, they preferred to think of “history as an active, collaborative venture” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 179). These findings supported the position of “new historians” like Becker who “advocated historical instruction that . . . paid attention ‘to the present life interests of the pupil’ ” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 181). The time was ripe for the emergence of a new approach to historical site interpretation.

Living History: The Role of the Individual

Living history was one outgrowth of the reorientation in the fields of history and historical site interpretation and a beneficiary of research like Rosenzweig and Thelen’s that indicated individuals make personal connections to the past. Although living history had existed in America since the 1930s through the pioneering work of Henry Ford and John D.

Rockefeller, Jr. at Greenfield Village and Colonial Williamsburg, respectively, it did not come into its own until the 1960s. Living history seeks to help visitors “imagine life as it must have seemed at a particular place and time and to communicate the importance of understanding with your head and your heart” (Anderson, 1984, p. 7). This form of interpretation uses interpreters to animate history. In its various incarnations, its goal is to make history leap off the page and into the three-dimensional world where visitors can interact with it personally. And, as Rosenzweig and Thelen’s (1998) survey results indicate, it is through this personal connection that history becomes meaningful to people.

Although Anderson (1984) identifies three types of living history (animation, demonstration, and participation), participatory interpretation offers the highest potential for engaging the visitor as an active agent in meaning making. Animation involves merely putting a costumed interpreter in a historic environment to “animate” the scene. No interaction takes place between visitors and interpreters in this approach. Demonstration takes the interpreter animating a landscape and puts him to work, demonstrating a historical skill or activity in its proper setting. Little or no one-on-one contact with the visitor typically occurs in this approach. The conversation that does occur centers around the demonstration itself and often takes the form of a scripted lecture with a question-and-answer period. Whereas animation and demonstration essentially keep visitors restrained to the role of observers, participatory interpretation “involve[es] the visitor in the simulation” (Anderson, 1984, p. 460) in ways that range from engaging them in a conversation with a costumed, in-character interpreter to expecting them to play a major role in the simulation, as in the Follow the North Star program examined in Chapter 4. Visitors are encouraged to

experience history rather than merely observe it or read about it. Such an approach fits well with the change in orientation that Rosenzweig and Thelen (1998) suggested of “looking at experiences [of contemporary individuals] and not [past] events as the basic units for engaging the past” (p. 38). Visitors are allowed to engage the past through the facets that interest them most. This reorientation represents a dramatic shift in the field of historical site interpretation.

Participatory Interpretation: A Constructivist Approach

Participatory interpretation represents the embodiment of the constructivist approach to history and interpretation by acknowledging the visitor as an active participant in the process of meaning making. By helping visitors connect their own experiences with those of individuals from the past through person-to-person engagement, the past becomes more meaningful. It dramatically opens up the possibility that “participants could change the thing they experienced or that the experience could change them” (Rosenzweig & Thelen, 1998, p. 38). Research studies have shown that this type of “empathetic identification is critical in creating a learning environment in which synthesis and explanation can occur” (Franco, 1994, p. 162). In his university teaching, anthropologist Victor Turner requires his students to bodily perform the ethnographic texts they study. They create costumes, fashion stage sets, and write scripts based on the ethnographic descriptions of rituals. One of his motivations is to “put students more fully inside the cultures they [are] reading about in anthropological monographs”

(Turner & Turner, 1982, p. 41). Although still outsiders to the cultures studied, the goal is to immerse students more deeply in the study of another culture. Students gain an understanding from “inside” the culture. These practices hint at the power and efficacy of places like Follow the North Star that seek to engage the visitor not only intellectually but also empathetically, through an insider’s perspective. The efficacy of such experiential learning was evident in the interviews with North Star participants. A group of elementary school teachers interviewed discussed a new appreciation for current racial relations given their experiences on the tour:

Mary: I do think it makes you understand a little bit of the anger that still exists.

Ellen: Yes, no wonder [some African-Americans are] still angry.

Jen: It’s going to make me angrier than I already am when I hear remarks—certain words.

Mary: Yes. We put up with it for an hour and a half.

Ellen: And they put up with it for . . .

Mary: . . . for hundreds of years.

Through their empathetic identification with the experiences of individuals from the past, visitors can learn more about their own lives.

The ease with which individuals can slide between the past and the present and the understandings this generates undermines many of the criticisms of living history. Architectural critic Ada Louise Huxtable, for example, has described this approach as merely a “stage set” and “historical play-acting” (Stover, 1989, p. 13). She relegates it to the role of entertainment and diversion while ignoring its ability to generate mean-

ingful experiences. Clelland (2000) criticizes contemporary historical tourist sites for what she calls the tendency to present “filtered experiences”—“places where the experience is devoid of the context of life at work and at home” (p. 106). He argues that the tourist experience should make a lasting impression on visitors intellectually, emotionally, or psychologically. Rather than mere diversion, it should carry a meaning that can be “integrated directly back into people’s ‘own environment’ ” (p. 108). Yet his criticisms only strengthen the case of participatory history as a valid approach to interpretation and learning. Certainly, the quality of living history sites varies, but perhaps it is Clelland and Huxtable’s understanding of this interpretive approach that is superficial, rather than the approach itself.

Emphasis on Physical Context

Despite the failure of these critics to examine credible living history, their comments do open up the topic of authenticity. No discussion of living history is complete without such a discussion. A constructivist approach to historical interpretation does not avoid the issue of authenticity. Rather, it requires a new understanding of the concept—one that emphasizes process instead of product. Unlike the museums of old that collected and displayed authentic historical artifacts in sealed cases that froze them in time and isolated them from the context of their previous existence, living history emphasizes the temporal quality of the objects. It embraces the natural processes of time that traditional museums hope to keep at bay. Instead of genuine artifacts, living history uses reproductions and emphasizes the “consumption of (reproduced) artifacts and structures” (Plimoth Plantation, 2000, Evolution of Living History section,

para. 4). The objects are “made, used, and worn out to replicate the same course of events in the original social context. . . . The wear and tear of the reproductions [become] a mark of ‘authenticity’ ” (Plimoth Plantation, 2000, Evolution of Living History section, para. 4, 9). As Vanderstel (1989) says, “Since history is the study of the *human* past—individually and collectively—and of the processes by which societies have changed over time, it is impossible to comprehend that past if we continue to rip segments of culture—either the craft process, the artifact, or the historical figure—out of their larger historical contexts. . . . [When we] do this, we [are] guilty of providing distorted images to the visitors that will elicit inaccurate reaction and perpetuate preconceived notions based upon a nostalgic view of the past” (p. 24). Whereas a traditional museum presents a picture of antiquity formed in part by the happenstance of what the worms and vandals leave untouched, “living history requires a comprehensive compliment of things to work with” (Plimoth Plantation, 2000, Evolution of Living History section, para. 11). In other words, it necessitates a context—a landscape in which each object comes alive. In this way, the measure of authenticity shifts from the artifact itself to the object’s position within a spatial and temporal continuum.

The Role of the Landscape Architect

This emphasis on the importance of context begins to bring the field of historical site interpretation closer to the realm of the landscape architect. The landscape, whether an indoor exhibit such as the Holocaust Museum or an outdoor environment like that of Follow the North Star, can be activated by the landscape architect as a powerful context in which historical

meanings can be revealed and constructed. By training and experience, the landscape architect is equipped to address the subtleties of context. As Franco (1994) says, “an exhibition or historic site is much more than the written text of labels and conveys much more complex information through spatial relationships, visual images, real things, and social interactions in a three-dimensional environment that is social, multisensory, and largely self-directed” (p. 158). In his argument for a hermeneutical approach to landscape architecture, Corner (1991) echoes the desire of individuals to connect their present with the past and suggests that landscape architecture can play a role in this process: “The call for a relinking of modern culture to its vital heritages demands a remapping of our history and tradition, in which landscape architecture has a significant part to play. The objective is to devise new meanings (futures) from a critical and yet imaginative reinterpretation of our tradition (past), thereby transcending the superficiality of pictorial image and historical style” (p. 127). Like proponents of living history, Corner is less concerned with the sanctity of the historic artifact itself than with the process by which it is made accessible (i.e., meaningful) to modern man. It is in this process that landscape architects can play an instrumental role.

The participatory approach to historic interpretation in particular maximizes the visitor’s potential to interact with this historical context. As such, it offers the most potential for the constructivist approach to design. With its emphasis on drawing a visitor in and involving them bodily and emotionally with the site, the Constructivist Design Approach can heighten the impact of participatory interpretation. Yet despite participatory interpretation’s emphasis on encouraging visitors to interact with their external environment, surprisingly little attention has been given within the field of museum studies to how to make

the most of this interaction through design. Although contemporary scholars have portrayed visitors as active agents in the meaning-making process (Silverman, 1997), few have examined the potential role of the outdoor landscape or indoor museum environment as a collaborator in this process. Much of the research on the physical context of the museum visitors' experience has focused on micro-level analyses of such elements of the museum experience as optimal lighting and temperature levels, effective wayfinding signs, and the efficacy of text in exhibit displays (Bitgood & Loomis, 1993; Melton, 1972). Building on a synthesis of museum studies literature, J. Falk and L. Dierking (1992) recently introduced a model for understanding the museum visitors' experience based on the interaction of the personal, social, and physical contexts of the visitor. Although they include in the physical realm such elements as "the architecture and 'feel' " (p. 3) of the environment, they fail to explore in depth the elements that contribute to them, saying

instead that, "It is generally assumed that objects and labels have the greatest influence on the visitor's museum experience" (p. 67). Again, they fail to address the larger issues of designing the environment and focus only on the design of exhibits within the museum landscape. The Constructivist Design Approach, however, begins to address this gap in the research as it explores how the design of the physical environment can assist with interpretive objectives.

Based on this research into the theory and practice of historical interpretation, a participatory approach to living history—one that emphasizes costumed interpreters in a functioning, contextually appropriate landscape—has been selected as the practice not only most suited to the Constructivist Design Approach but also most able to benefit from it. With the interpretive approach selected, the next chapter focuses on identifying the historical content of the interpretation.