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Presenting archaeological sites to the public

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Introduction

The presentation of archaeological sites to the public, broadly considered, encompasses a vast and bewildering array of encounters between a cacophony of audiences, each with their very different needs, and an equally cacophonous variety of archaeological contexts, each of which presents its own problems and challenges. Two short examples will underline this point.

On the south-eastern tip on the island of Malta, the remains of a megalithic structure dating from the Neolithic, and excavated a century ago, stand perched on an eroding cliff-edge, and are gradually but inexorably falling into the sea. The occasional visitor that is persistent enough to locate the remains is met by warning signs to keep away from the site and the treacherously crumbling cliff-edge.

At the heart of one of the great cities of the ancient Mediterranean, the church of Santa Sophia in modern-day Istanbul is not only the most sublime monument of the Byzantine world, but also incorporates works of Ottoman as well as ancient Greek civilisation. Of the three and a half million people that thronged through the site in 2014, probably only a minuscule proportion realised that they had walked past a bronze door created in the second century BC for a Hellenistic temple in Tarsus, and only installed in the church by a Byzantine emperor a millennium later.
These two quick vignettes may begin to give a sense of the infinite variety of challenges that may be gathered under the rubric of ‘presentation of archaeological sites to the public’. This chapter will attempt to give some semblance of order to this variety by examining a selection of the more prevalent challenges. The terms ‘archaeological site’, ‘the public’ and ‘presentation’ are discussed and defined first. Some of the issues surrounding the presentation of archaeological sites are then discussed, using the concept of accessibility and its different forms as a set of pegs to structure the discussion.

Definitions

The presentation of archaeological sites to the public encompasses a wide range of issues and scenarios, which may vary dramatically according to the site and to the different public audiences that may have an interest in that site. A useful point to start the discussion is to examine what may be meant by each of these terms.

Defining ‘archaeological sites’

The very idea of an ‘archaeological site’ is a modern creation, which only took the shape familiar to us today during the course of the nineteenth century. The same idea continues to shape present-day ideas of how members of the public should engage with archaeology, and therefore deserves to be looked at more closely. During the nineteenth century, a great increase in public awareness of archaeological remains was witnessed across Western Europe, closely followed by a heightened awareness of the responsibilities of the state to safeguard such remains in the public interest (Murray 1990; Diaz-Andreu 2007). The most widely adopted solution was to identify what were considered to be the more significant archaeological remains, and to bring them into public ownership, often through the acquisition by the state of an arbitrary rectangle or circle of land. The transformation from being a component of the inhabited landscape to become an ‘archaeological site’ or ‘archaeological monument’ was often completed by surrounding the expropriated land with a fence and, in some cases, adding a brief explanation of the name, date, nature and purpose of the monument.

This transformation has had far-reaching effects on how archaeological remains treated this way are encountered and experienced by
the public. Firstly, they are turned into a place apart, divorced from life in the present day, purportedly frozen in time, to serve as a window into the past. Secondly, wherever a gated enclosure is created, access becomes a controlled commodity, often accompanied by fixed opening hours and even entrance fees. Thirdly, the way people are expected, or even allowed, to behave around these remains is also transformed. They have now become visitors and consumers, who follow pre-ordained routes while diligently admiring the remains, with the minimum of direct physical contact.

The nineteenth-century paradigm that has just been outlined has come under considerable fire since the 1990s. Archaeological theory has conducted extensive critiques of the very concept of a ‘site’ as a useful analytical tool, emphasising instead the importance of taking in the scale and context of the landscape as a continuum, of which any site can only be an arbitrarily defined part (see Lock and Molyneaux 2006 for reviews of earlier work). This profound shift in emphasis has reflected itself in the prevailing paradigms for the management and presentation of archaeological sites and landscapes, with reverberations ranging from international documents such as the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter (ICOMOS 2013) and the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2013), down to individual site management decisions at the local scale. Since the 1990s, several of the fences that had been installed over the previous century and a half have been dismantled and removed, facilitating the reading of archaeological structures in their landscape setting. For instance, the Ħaġar Qim Neolithic Temples on Malta, which form part of a UNESCO World Heritage Site, were enclosed by such a rectangular boundary during the 1960s, which was pulled down in the late 1990s. The same happened at the Ġgantija Temples on nearby Gozo.

For the purpose of the present discussion, therefore, it may be useful to follow a broad definition of an ‘archaeological site’ as any place where in-situ archaeological remains may be encountered. It may range from a sprawling landscape, through the more conventional ruin with gated access, to the archaeological fragments that survive on the busy streets of many of our cities. Each of these scenarios presents unique challenges, and will be kept in mind in the following discussion.
Defining ‘the public’

‘The public’ is of course a no less problematic term. In practice, it encompasses a wide diversity of audiences, with a bewildering variety of needs, aspirations, interests, concerns, and attitudes, which inevitably shape their perception and experience of ‘archaeological sites’ and how they are presented. These needs and expectations may vary with linguistic, ethnic, cultural, social and religious affiliations, as well as age and level of education. Audiences that live in the area where a feature is located may have different needs and expectations from visitors from another part of the country, which are likely be different again from those of visitors from other countries. A further distinction is that between people actually crossing the threshold of a gated site, and those that have not done so, but who nevertheless have a perception and an understanding of the site, which still forms part of their reality.

The range and breadth of audiences and needs, as just outlined, must be kept in mind in the following discussion on some of the issues surrounding the presentation of archaeological sites.

Interpretation and presentation

A final point regarding definitions concerns the terms ‘interpretation’ and ‘presentation’, which are sometimes used interchangeably. For simplicity, the definitions used in the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICOMOS 2008) are followed here. ‘Interpretation’ is given a wider definition that includes the full range of activities to raise public awareness and understanding of a site, be it on or off site, while ‘presentation’ is limited to the narrower definition of ‘the carefully planned communication of interpretive content through the arrangement of interpretive information, physical access, and interpretative infrastructure at a cultural heritage site’ (ICOMOS 2008). The two are of course inseparable, and this chapter makes reference to both.

Sustainability

Archaeological monuments have a long history of interventions aimed at their preservation, stretching back at least to the early nineteenth century. More recently, these efforts have been guided by a succession of international charters dedicated to principles of good practice in the
conservation of architectural and archaeological monuments. In the face of the global rise of tourism, the debate about the conservation of archaeological monuments has sometimes taken the form of a struggle between preservation and enjoyment of the resource, in which the only ethically responsible choice is to give priority to conservation, even at the expense of limiting public access.

Global debates that have taken place since the 1990s allow this issue to be presented in a different way. A cardinal consideration in the management of any non-renewable resource is its sustainability. Against the backdrop of concerns over climate change and environmental sustainability (WCED 1987), the concept of safeguarding the rights of future generations has entered the mainstream. The same principle may be applied to cultural heritage and, more specifically, to archaeological sites. Future generations have a right to enjoy these archaeological resources; conservation is the only way to safeguard that right. So rather than being diametrically opposed to access and enjoyment, and an end in itself, conservation is an integral part of a strategy to ensure long-term, sustainable enjoyment of archaeological resources. The reciprocity of conservation and interpretation has been further underlined in the ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites (ICOMOS 2008). In the following discussion on accessibility, conservation will be referred to in this perspective.

Accessibility

A central theme that runs through the presentation and public enjoyment of archaeological resources is that of accessibility, which encompasses a wide range of considerations, the most familiar of which are physical, intellectual and financial accessibility.

Physical accessibility

Physical access to an archaeological site is a prerequisite for it to be enjoyed at first hand. The very nature of archaeological sites and their management history may, however, pose a long list of difficulties. To begin with, the very setting of an archaeological site in the landscape, which is an intrinsic component of the site’s values, may be remote and difficult to access (see Figure 6.1).

Protective measures such as reburial or fencing may create further limitations to physical access for the general public. In the case of
small and remote sites that are enclosed, it may be difficult to deploy the human resources needed to have regular opening times for the public. Even within major archaeological sites such as Pompeii, which is among the most visited sites in Europe, substantial sectors of the city are off limits for conservation or safety reasons, or are only accessible by appointment. A related difficulty stems from the simple fact that archaeological sites were not usually designed to accommodate a flow of visitors, let alone to conform with modern-day accessibility guidelines. Low doorways, steep staircases and narrow corridors abound, severely restricting access to the less mobile and the less nimble. As a result, the encounter between the visitor and the archaeology often runs the risk of being limited and fragmentary, as well as cluttered by the very infrastructure required to make the visit possible in the first place. Managing these issues is one of the primary challenges in the presentation of any archaeological site, and will be discussed next.

Figure 6.1: Footpath leading to Grotta del Genovese, Levanzo, Egadi Islands. The cave houses contain an extraordinary assemblage of rock-art, ranging from Upper Palaeolithic to Neolithic in date. It is located in a pristine stretch of coastline that may only be reached by boat in calm weather. The only other way to reach the site is down a steep and rugged footpath over 700m long (Source: author).
The principle that any public facility must provide access for all, without discriminating against persons with any form of disability, is now firmly entrenched and widely embraced. The design of any new visitor facility needs to take this principle into account from the very earliest stages of concept development, through to detailed specification and final implementation. Gradients and floor levels in visitor welcoming areas, or on pathways through a site, need to conform with or improve upon the national standards to minimise discomfort to people using pushchairs and wheelchairs. Beyond the obvious that is usually spelt out in such regulations, the devil is often in the detail. Outdoor paved areas that leave gaps between the paving slabs or use egg-crate matrices to allow grass to grow through the pathway, for instance, do not only present an obstacle to a person in high heels, but are also challenging to anyone using a walking-stick. In any written signage or interpretation, the type and size of font, colour scheme and sentence structure need to be carefully orchestrated to maximise their accessibility to people with visual or cognitive impairments. Any facility which includes an audio component, from screened videos to portable guides, needs to include a closed-loop option for people using hearing aids.

While meeting such requirements in a visitor centre or in the approaches to a site is generally straightforward, doing so within a complex archaeological structure may become nightmarishly difficult, presenting challenging dilemmas. Several archaeological structures are characterised by steps, sharp changes in level, restricted doorways or fragile surfaces. In some instances, these obstacles may be bypassed, for instance by providing a bird’s-eye view from a fully accessible walkway (see Figure 6.2). In other instances, however, creating access without a severe impact on the archaeology is well-nigh impossible. In such instances, providing more information about the inaccessible part – through videos, models and other media – may help mitigate the problem.

The insertion of walkways is itself a source of new challenges. Walkways may need to be inserted to provide access for all, as already noted, or even to manage visitor flow, to protect the site from the visitor and, in some instances, to protect the visitor from hazards on site. In all these situations, the very insertion of a walkway, or even any barrier or interpretative tool, alters the relationship between the visitor and the archaeology. The way a volume or layout is experienced is dramatically different, if it is divided into an ‘accessible’ and an ‘inaccessible’ area. Furthermore, a risk with walkways is that they change the point of view, usually by raising it above the original ground level. In some cases, such
a shift may interfere with the visitor’s understanding of the site. Bearing in mind the archaeological literature on the importance of bodily experience and phenomenology in understanding how space, particularly architectural space, was organised and perceived in the past (e.g. Tilley 2004), every effort should be made to keep such distortions to the absolute minimum necessary, from concept through to realisation.

The physical relationship between people and place is being reshaped by virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) technologies, which are making rapid inroads into the mass market. VR headsets developed primarily for gaming now make it possible for users to interact with a virtual space, and may be used to simulate the experience of being in an archaeological site or even a reconstruction of a past landscape or streetscape, without ever leaving one’s home. Meanwhile AR and ‘mixed reality’ technologies are making it possible to introduce digital imagery to augment the user’s experience of a real physical space. Applications that may be installed on a smartphone make it possible to overlay virtual reconstructions or historic images of a space even as one walks through it. These emerging technologies have far-reaching implications for the
Case study 6.1: The Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum, Paola, Malta

The Ħal Saflieni Hypogeum is a rock-cut funerary complex created on the island of Malta, in the central Mediterranean, during the late Neolithic period (c.3600–c.2500 BC). In 1980, the site was inscribed on the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The complex has three main levels. The upper level lies just below the upper surface of bedrock, while the lower level reaches a maximum depth of over 10m below ground level. The chambers forming each level were hollowed out of the soft limestone, making extensive use of the faults and bedding planes that characterise it. Chamber walls were decorated with red ochre paintings and highly finished sculptures imitating the architecture of megalithic buildings above ground (Pace 2000).

The main entrance to the middle and lower levels was blocked at some point by roof collapse, and the site lay undisturbed for centuries, if not millennia, until its accidental discovery in 1902. The opening of the site to visitors shortly after, and the progressive increase in visitors up to around 1990, contributed to a number of serious conservation problems which were threatening the very existence of the site and its fragile paintings. Light fixtures, which were of course concentrated in the areas most interesting for visitors, encouraged the growth of algae on the walls, hiding the painted decoration. The carbon dioxide emitted by the large numbers of visitors was a further damaging factor, as well as the constant contact between visitors and archaeological surfaces.

With the support of UNESCO, a project was developed between the late 1980s and the early 1990s for the conservation and sustainable enjoyment of the site. A number of measures were undertaken during the implementation of the project. The number of visitors was limited to ten at a time, and visits strictly timed, to make their impact on the microclimate of the site more manageable. Walkways were installed to better manage visitor flow, reduce physical impact of visitors on site, and improve visitor safety. Visitor lights were programmed to light up one chamber after another, leading visitors through the site.

Apart from the primary purpose of the light programme, which was to control light levels for conservation reasons, this solution also presented some interesting challenges and opportunities in terms of the presentation of the site to visitors. The lighting system was not simply a constraint intended to control light levels as well as the
way archaeological sites are encountered. Firstly, they present opportunities to offer an ever-wider audience a glimpse of sites that are not physically accessible because of their sensitivity, or because they no longer exist, or simply because they are difficult to reach. Secondly, they offer exciting opportunities to enrich the experience of visitors who are actually physically present on a site, by complementing the material evidence with reconstructions and archival material. As the availability of these tools on the mass market gathers momentum, it is also posing new questions for archaeological site interpretation. What are the qualities of a first-hand encounter with an archaeological site, which cannot be conveyed through VR? And what kind of content do we want to include when augmenting a visit to an actual site, in order to enhance its intellectual accessibility?

Recent technological developments have given rise to another significant change in the relationship between archaeological sites and their visitors. It is now possible to create a 3D model of an object from multiple 2D images. The 3D recreation of an archaeological site may also be achieved using holiday snapshots crowdsourced from the general public. In the wake of the destruction of museum collections and sites taking place in Iraq, Project Mosul was set up in 2015, appealing to members of the public who had visited any of the affected sites to send in their pictures, which were then successfully used to virtually recreate the sites. The project has since widened its scope to other sites around the globe (https://projectmosul.org).

Intellectual accessibility

A second, subtler pillar of accessibility is intellectual. Physical hurdles having being overcome, how is the experience of the site being interpreted, understood and retained by different members of the public? To
what extent do archaeological sites make sense to these different audiences, and how may the presentation of those sites help this process of making sense?

The process of presenting archaeological remains to different audiences begins long before the design of interpretation facilities. It is rooted in the very discovery, excavation and study of the archaeology and, secondly, in the decisions taken about how to preserve those remains. These two points will be considered in turn.

The first point is that the research questions that are posed during and after an excavation inevitably condition the narratives and interpretations that will be produced by that research. It will eventually be those same narratives that an archaeologist is likely to draw upon to explain and present that site to other audiences. This lays the responsibility firmly on the archaeologist to pose questions that are meaningful and relevant to the communities that they serve. An interpretation of a site that is based solely on chronology, phasing and artefact typology is unlikely to make for a riveting and memorable encounter. An engagement with themes of enduring concern is much more likely to do so. Survival, solidarity and conflict, taste, wealth and power, intimacy, discovery and disease are but a few examples that may provoke empathy in a wide range of audiences, a spark of recognition of some fragment of their own preoccupations. Such moments of empathy allow us glimpses of how different, or similar, a life in the past may have been.

The second point concerns decisions about what to preserve of the archaeological remains and how to do this. A well-established principle in conservation practice is that conservation interventions must remain legible to the viewer, so that the remains themselves are an enduring document of their own life history (ICOMOS 1964; Jokilehto 2007: 7). Good practice requires that restorations and reconstructions, used here in the sense defined in the Burra Charter, are readily distinguishable. The distinction between what survives in situ and any new materials that are introduced to reconstruct missing components should be evident not only to a specialist, but also to the lay visitor. This may be achieved in a variety of ways, such as the use of different materials (Figure 6.3), different surface textures, or the insertion of a boundary marker.

The selection of what to retain and preserve of an archaeological site may be equally thorny, particularly in multi-period sites where the traces of one cultural episode may obscure those of the ones before. In such situations, it is vital that the research agenda for any significant excavation or conservation project sets out some clear guiding principles on how the site should or should not be modified by the project,
what kind of document it will become, and how it will be presented. Throughout the lifetime of such projects, it is equally vital to maintain a debate on the values of different components of the site as they are revealed, and how these values may vary with different audiences. Faced with the ruins of a Hellenistic monumental building demolished by an earthquake, for example, a specialist in classical architecture may be keen to perform anastylosis to reassemble the architectural composition to its former grandeur. On the other hand, it may be persuasively argued that the collapsed masonry may, if preserved where it fell at the moment of the earthquake, remain an eloquent testimony of a traumatic event that played a decisive role in the destiny of that site. Such dilemmas underline the need for an approach that is informed by values, also

Figure 6.3: Valadier’s early nineteenth-century restoration of the Colosseum in Rome. The use of brick, although in this case motivated by economic considerations, makes it very easy for the visitor to distinguish the restoration from the original travertine structure (Jokilehto 1999: 85–7).
Case study 6.2: Segedunum Roman Fort, Baths and Museum, Wallsend, Tyne and Wear, United Kingdom

The fort of Segedunum was a Roman stronghold built to protect the eastern end of Hadrian's Wall, the northernmost frontier of the Roman Empire, and remained in use from the second to the fourth century AD. During the course of the nineteenth century, the area of the fort was built over by modern housing and industrial buildings. Since the 1970s, many of the modern buildings that lay over the fort have been removed, extensive archaeological investigations have been conducted, and the site has been made accessible to the public. The fort suffered from a problem that is very common on sites from the ancient world, in that it is not preserved above the level of its foundations; it is therefore often very difficult for the casual visitor to appreciate the colossal scale and volume that many of these sites had originally. At Segedunum, extensive works initiated in the 1990s have successfully addressed these challenges. The first challenge is to give the modern visitor a sense of the scale, layout and extent of the fort. Although it covered an area larger than two football fields (about 120m by about 140m), so little was preserved above ground that it is difficult to get any sense of the layout of the fort from ground level. This was addressed with a daring and innovative solution. A modernist structure looking very much like an airport control tower was installed, equipped with lifts and a viewing platform. The backfill protecting the archaeological remains was picked out in a different colour to highlight the footprint of the walls and buildings of the fort. From the vantage point of the viewing platform, the plan of the fort is therefore very legible, as is its relationship to the surrounding modern streets and buildings that still cover part of the fort. The tower has also become a landmark that announces the presence of the fort, which would otherwise be lost in the rather anonymous urban streetscape.

Another significant decision taken at Segedunum was to fully reconstruct a selection of the original buildings, complete with their internal decoration. One of the most popular of these reconstructions is the bath house. The elegantly decorated interior and fittings of the fully functional bath house allow an intimate and human glimpse of the Roman garrison's concerns for their creature comforts, totally altering the way most visitors think about life on a Roman fort,
taking into account which characteristics of a site may set it apart from comparable sites.

As noted above, the process of discovery, excavation, research and preservation of archaeological remains has major implications for the way a site is presented to and experienced by the public, with the concomitant responsibility to keep the public interest in view throughout the entire process. In practice, however, the detail of a ‘how and what’ is communicated to the public is usually developed after the archaeological research process has been concluded. This stage raises a series of fresh challenges. To begin with, there is the question of what to communicate. What narratives will be told to the public? Or, to use the more fashionable jargon, what storyboards will underpin the visitor experience? In more useful terminology, what are the facts, issues, problems and relationships that are witnessed by the site, and that may be interesting and relevant to different audiences today? The answers may vary dramatically from site to site. Some common underlying themes will be considered in turn.

The first theme that may be noted is people. Narratives that allow some insight into the beliefs and worldviews, the aspirations and fears, that shaped an individual’s life in the past have the potential to resonate with the attitudes of people today, not necessarily because of their similarities, but even more so because of their differences. Archaeological evidence abounds in insights into the intimate and the personal. Graffiti on the walls of a prison-cell. A toy buried with a child. Skeletal evidence of a painful ailment caused by decades of toil. A treasured necklace made of some highly prized material. Such evidence provides opportunities for encounters between the experiences of people today and those of people from the past, and lends itself to a more engaging and memorable presentation of any archaeological site.
Another recurring theme is place. The relationship of people to the landscapes they inhabit is an inescapable and universal component of human experience. The issues of subsistence, cosmology, war, ownership, exchange, statehood and identity resonate across time, and are embodied in the landscapes where human dramas were, and are, played out. The presentation of an archaeological site may draw on a rich seam of themes here. The availability of natural resources, and how they were exploited across time. The textures of the different raw materials that were available, and the sensations of working them with the technologies of the day. The constraints and opportunities presented by the climate in different seasons, and strategies to cope with and take advantage of these factors in the past. The issues of environmental exploitation, over-exploitation, and response to climate change.

Another point that may be noted, closely tied to the themes of people and place already discussed, is that of multi-sensory experience. As has been noted in the wider debates on archaeological interpretations more generally, the visual has often dominated our narratives at the expense of the other senses. Since the 1990s, the importance of the full range of phenomenological experience has been recognised (see Skeates 2010 for a succinct review of earlier work). This development presents another range of opportunities and challenges for the presentation of archaeological sites in ways that are more engaging and meaningful to the public today. The sounds and smells experienced in the everyday lives of the past – in industry, commerce, ritual, cuisine and war – are some of the more obvious examples, and may be powerful triggers of memories and associations, engaging audiences with an intimacy and empathy that would be difficult to achieve through other means (Silberman 2015). The experience of landscapes and buildings may be enriched by multi-sensory accounts of how they would have been experienced. Reconstructing the quality of the lighting that may have prevailed in a place of worship in a different period, or the dank, cold conditions that had to be endured in a prison cell, or the kinaesthetic experience as one follows a processional way to a monumental climax, are all ways of allowing glimpses of past experience that are likely to leave an indelible impression (see Figure 6.4).

The need for multi-vocality in the presentation of archaeological sites is another theme that has been widely debated since the 1990s (Bender 1998). The Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe 2005), also referred to as the Faro Convention, lays down explicit and coherent principles on this issue.
Article 7, which deals with ‘cultural heritage and dialogue’, requires countries that have ratified the convention, inter alia, to:

1. encourage reflection on the ethics and methods of presentation of the cultural heritage, as well as respect for diversity of interpretations
2. establish processes for conciliation to deal equitably with situations where contradictory values are placed on the same cultural heritage by different communities
3. develop knowledge of cultural heritage as a resource to facilitate peaceful co-existence by promoting trust and mutual understanding with a view to resolution and prevention of conflicts.

This ambitious agenda should inspire approaches to the presentation of archaeological sites, even beyond the frontiers of the countries that have signed up to the Convention. This is particularly relevant in situations characterised by long-standing contestation over territory. Archaeological sites often feature prominently in such discourse, with
major implications for their presentation to the public. One risk is to offer a partial narrative skewed by a partisan agenda. Another, no less problematic approach is to offer anodyne narratives that ignore or skirt the burning issues of the day. Wherever multiple points of view are present, the presentation of an archaeological site has the potential to engage with, map out and explore these divergent views in an equitable manner, creating a space for more constructive debate, and even perhaps contributing to resolution and reconciliation.

The debate over multi-vocality is by no means restricted to the problems of territorial contestation. A ‘diversity of interpretations’ and even ‘contradictory values’ such as those referred to in Article 7 of the Faro Convention may be placed on archaeological sites in many shapes and forms. The Goddess, New Age, Druid and Wicca movements are but four examples present on the contemporary European scene (Rountree 2002, 2003; Schadla-Hall 2004). Their interpretations of archaeological (particularly prehistoric) sites are often wildly divergent from mainstream archaeological interpretations, posing a rather thorny problem to a site manager trying to live up to the spirit of the Faro Convention. At which point does the multi-vocal inclusion of these alternative narratives cross the line to become public misinformation? The ICOMOS (2008) Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites gives some more detailed guidance here. Principle 2 of the Charter, while recognising that ‘interpretation should be based on a well-researched, multidisciplinary study’, goes on to say ‘meaningful interpretation necessarily includes reflection on alternative historical hypotheses, local traditions, and stories’. Alternative narratives, regardless of whether they are consistent with archaeological orthodoxy, form part of the rich tapestry of human responses and values built around an archaeological site. Their inclusion in the presentation of a site is therefore desirable. The responsibility not to mislead the visitor may be addressed with suitable signposting on the context and origin of these alternative interpretations and, crucially, the evidence on which they are based.

The presentation of alternative narratives is tied not only to alternative interpretations of a site, but also to the challenge posed by a wide range of audience needs. Schoolchildren, adults with different levels of education, individuals with learning disabilities, locals and foreigners, will all have different needs and expectations, which need to be addressed if the goal of intellectual accessibility is to be met. Any robust strategy to meet this spectrum of needs on an archaeological site is bound to include alternative modes of communication, where each
audience may find a level of complexity and detail that it is comfortable with. Even a presentation tool as simple as a printed panel may have different text boxes with two or three different levels of complexity, distinguished by their fonts and format, allowing a viewer to choose what to focus on and what to glide over. Audio tours may likewise have two alternative narratives, pitched at different audiences.

A final point concerning the presentation facilities required to make an archaeological site intellectually accessible is the question of where to put them. Fixed signage along a visitor itinerary is a popular solution. One limitation of such information panels is that of space, which limits the number of languages that may be included. Another problem is that of clutter on an archaeological site, as too many panels may become visually intrusive. The alternatives include portable solutions, such as low-tech information sheets or guide books in a wider range of languages, or, where the resources are available, multi-lingual audio guides or interactive programmes on portable electronic devices. Portable devices may themselves become a distraction of a different kind, which ends up hindering rather than helping visitors from making the most of their brief, first-hand encounter with an archaeological monument. Downloadable audio tours that may be played on the visitor’s own mobile phone or tablet have the advantage of doing away with the fuss and clutter of being issued with an audio wand and having to learn how to operate it there and then. A further advantage is that they may be heard even prior to the visit, lessening the risk of their becoming too distracting during the visit itself.

Another approach is that of the on-site visitor centre, which allows visitors to engage with information immediately before and after a visit, without cluttering the experience of the site itself. An added advantage of a visitor centre is that it makes it possible to display artefacts from the site, rather than in some distant museum, making the connection between site and artefact much more meaningful and tangible. Visitor centres may also create a space for other activities targeting specific audiences such as school groups.

Financial, attitudinal and cultural barriers to accessibility

Perhaps a less obvious dimension of accessibility is that tied to socio-economic factors, which may also result in considerable obstacles to the enjoyment of an archaeological site by the public (Lang 2000). The financial component is straightforward enough: the cost of travelling to
and entering a site may prove prohibitive to certain groups. In Britain, the debate on social inclusion that took off in the 1990s led to the reduction or removal of entrance fees to several national museums. The evaluation of the impact of these measures makes sobering reading. Contrary to the hopes and expectations that inspired the measures, the socio-economic profile of visitors did not change appreciably, despite an increase in visitor numbers (Appleyard 2013; Bailey and Falconer 1998). The fact that the removal of the financial barrier was not enough to draw in under-represented groups underlines the fact that there are other, perhaps even more challenging, obstacles preventing certain groups from enjoying cultural heritage resources. Attitudinal and social obstacles include the perception that an archaeological site has nothing to offer them, or that it is there only for foreign visitors, or that they will not be welcome, or that it is a waste of time they cannot afford. The manner in which an archaeological site is presented, and the range of activities on offer, has a crucial role to play in any strategy to surmount such barriers. Many of the Greek and Roman theatres that are dotted across the Mediterranean world have enjoyed a new lease of life as spaces for theatrical performances, ranging from ancient Greek tragedies to contemporary and experimental theatre. While the conservation concerns raised by such re-use require careful attention, it is difficult to think of a more appropriate, more appealing or more memorable way to draw the public into experiencing an ancient theatre, and to make it relevant to people’s lives today.

The integration of narratives that are meaningful and relevant to contemporary publics is one solution that has already been mentioned. Another is the embracing of alternative narratives, which will reduce the risk of any particular group feeling disenfranchised. Complementing efforts within the site with outreach activities in the community, partnerships with local organisations and with events aimed expressly at under-represented communities may all help correct such imbalances. The adaptation of site presentation facilities to reflect and convey components of the national curriculum for different disciplines is another recipe for increasing the relevance and enjoyment of the archaeological resource.

The challenges posed by social and attitudinal barriers bring us back to the paradigm of the gated site, discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The divorcing of a site from its spatial context by means of a fenced enclosure often had direct consequences for the alienation of local communities. A very different approach to the conservation, management and presentation of archaeological remains is their full
integration into the fabric of everyday life. This approach has a particularly long pedigree in the history of cities, where the sheer density of land-use, often combined with an abundance of archaeological remains, makes it difficult to separate and cordon off the archaeology from the rest of the living fabric of the city. Ancient cities such as Rome and Istanbul are perhaps the archetypal examples of this happy co-existence, where the daily encounter with archaeology is as inevitable as the urban traffic. The model of integration of archaeology into the daily life of the city has made a vibrant return, with a number of innovative solutions aimed at preserving archaeology side by side with newly installed infrastructure. The underground transport systems of London, Rome and Athens all have elements of archaeology presented to commuters, usually in situ or, in the case of portable objects, near to the location where they were discovered. The challenge for the future is to explore how this model may be applied even beyond the confines of the city, in places where the integration of archaeology with the contemporary is not imposed by necessity, but becomes an end in itself.

Conclusions

This overview of some key issues in the presentation of archaeological sites is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but is rather intended to convey the range and complexity of the issues at stake, and to question some of the more prevalent assumptions about the nature of archaeological site interpretation. A cardinal rule which the present writer has learnt to follow is that each site will present unique scenarios, challenges and opportunities, and that no solution may be imported wholesale and applied without careful development to suit the specific situation. In order to achieve and maintain creative engagement between any archaeological resource and its manifold audiences, any interpretation strategy must remain as alive and dynamic as those audiences themselves.