Space, Place and Heritage: Can the conventional heritage paradigm in Bangladesh accommodate plurality and heterogeneous representations?

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Abstract

Beyond its materialistic connotations, 'place' can be regarded as a manufacturer of the values, meanings, and narratives of multiple emotionally and functionally interconnected entities within its continuum. A heritage endowment of a particular place significantly augments its values and simultaneously enhances the ingrained and embedded cultural process. As place-images could be polysemic, there could be multiple interpretations of a particular heritage place based on peoples' understanding. If the representation is static and linear, the 'heritagisation' process of a place could impact into several spatial consequences that substantially effect the visitors as well as associated communities, influencing their cultural experiences and performativity with respect to the place. Looking into two case sites in Bangladesh, this paper seeks to delve deeper into the tangible interconnectedness of the traditional heritage paradigm practised in the Global South and questions the magnitudes of its generic consequences that favour materiality and frequently mandate particular representation. By critically analysing a couple of examples, this paper investigates the innate nature of this conventional 'heritage' paradigm and discusses its nuances to determine whether it can accommodate diversity, inconclusiveness and heterogeneous narratives of places that can broaden the terrain of heritage within the context of Bangladesh.

1. Introduction

In Bangladesh, heritage sites are being visited by a significant number of tourists each year, and that number is growing. The expansion of the 'heritage industry' has also had the impact of stimulating and invigorating individuals and communities to interact with the past in a vast array of activities, ranging from site-visiting to organising community events(Hasan & Jobaid, 2014; Roy & Roy, 2015). Government and institutions make efforts to represent the heritage spaces with interpretations so that visitors can learn from the site and take part in different activities related with the site's underlying historical and cultural significances. In addition to mere visiting, there is a vast potential for achieving a wide variety of

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activities involving learning and gathering knowledge (Geisbusch, 2012; Camere-ro-Izquierdo, Garrido-Samaniego, & Silva-Garcia, 2014).

In light of the preceding, this study does not seek to either prescribe a rigidly defined heritage manifesto that should enhance the site visits or to criticise any heritage works that have been acclaimed by audiences or academics. Instead, the objective is to analyse the contemporary heritage practises in the interpretation apparatus following the conservation-preservation hiatus. The premise of this paper is that there is a need to understand the conventional heritage practices and its interaction with people, spaces and places. In order to do so, within the backdrop of critical heritage studies, how representations are formulated and then interpreted at cultural sites will be explored.

While the title is somewhat ambitious and requires a deeper investigation in its own right, in order to keep it concise and to narrow the focus exclusively on the context, the paper has been divided into three sections. In the first section of this paper, the foundation will be contextualised through an exploratory investigation of conventional discourse from a range of scholarly work. In the second section, the underlying negotiation will be investigated, and a theoretical framework will be developed. This part also discusses the research design. Applying the theoretical framework with a synthesis of the literatures on heritage interpretation, we examine the interpretive apparatus within the heritage paradigm of the case sites to determine whether or not the conventional discourse can accommodate plurality and heterogeneous representations. As both of the authors of this paper have a background in architectural conservation and have been associated with working at the two sites, their views have also complemented this paper.

2. A theoretical exploration into the understandings of the conventional Heritage Discourse

'Heritage' in a broader context incorporates both tangibility and intangibility within its paradigm. Likewise, cultural heritage involves both tangible and intangible resources, including historic places and cultural traditions respectively (McKercher & Du Cros, 2002). These cultural heritage sites are not merely relics of the past, rather, they may support the culture by giving locals a sense of identity and by serving as a place of social interaction that links communities and enables the continuation of cultural practises (Bushell, 2012; Stallmeyer, 2019). The traditional definitions of heritage collectively relate to the identity and valuation of people as a 'reflection and expression of their evolving knowledge, beliefs, and traditions' (English Heritage, 2021). Thus, heritage is contingent on socially crafted cultural

values, which are in turn framed by meanings communicated to their observers. The contemporary debate on the pervasive form of heritage which is substantiated by the studies of Larkham (1995), Lowenthal (1998), and others, necessitates a precise definition and breadth of the associated term. Historically the notion of heritage has been centred on material objects since they were thought to best represent a specific period in history and its objectives, perspectives, and institutional arrangements, which can also be reflected from the accounts of William Morris. A contemporary shift on the broad and blanket term of heritage is evident which proclaims itself as a thoroughly a modern concept with a ubiquitous phenomenon and has transformed into a 'self-conscious creed' (McCrone, Morris, & Kiely, 1995). Graham et al. assert that only in the last few decades has the word evolved to imply more than a legal bequest, given its discordant nature.

Considering the apparent complexity of the heritage phenomenon, David Harvey explored the process of heritage endowment of a place, informing the term heritagisation on a deeper temporal framework. He informed, "the evolution of a medieval sense of heritage is related to changes in technology and transitions in the experience of place and space, while some more recent developments in the heritage concept are related to the more recent societal changes connected to colonial (and post-colonial) experience"(Harvey, 2001). The notion of heritagisation, which also signifies re-heritagisation, and de-heritagisation which coexist on the opposite ends of the same axis, refer to heritage endowment processes that frequently occur when constructed heritage is contested and challenged. Changes in meaning throughout the process of heritagisation may be segmented into a variety of factors that impact the complex interplay between diverse entities and their distinct interests. Professor Rodney Harrison defines heritagisation as the inclusion of new heritage, the reaffirmation of previously declared heritage, the rejection of previously designated heritage, and, most crucially, the reinterpretation of heritage sites (Harrison, 2012). There are spatial consequences of heritagisation on place-images, as this process substantially impact associated communities, influencing their ubiquitous experiences and performativity in relation to heritage places (Harrison, 2013; Nilsson, 2003). Beyond its materialistic notions, a 'place' can be conceived as a manufacturer of values, meanings, and narratives of multiple emotionally and functionally connected entities within its continuum(Massey, 2008). Thus, a heritage endowment of a particular place significantly augments its values and simultaneously enhances the embedded cultural process(Harvey, 2015). Part of the essence of a place within the built environment is in continuous evolution, change and transformation. Among the many factors that are associated with a space's transformation, one of the crucial important is historical and cultural significances. When these significances are attributed within a place, it contributes to the understandings of place-images.

Interpretation enables in constructing the place-image and place-identity to its observers. The place-images are heterogeneous and inconsistent based on how it is seen and the cultural and social relations a community or an individual has with a specific place. The interpretation contributes to a systematic, which is typically a top-down method of planning a heritage site by means of exhibitions, events, the organisation of buildings, services, human resource management, and material concepts(Staiff, 2016). These ideas contribute to moulding visitors' perceptions of certain visuals, which cannot be seen in isolation. "[…] interpretation cannot be seen in isolation. It must be viewed in the context of the entire visit – from the stimulus that led to the decision to visit, through the journey to the site, the visit itself, the journey home and the sharing of memories. We must never lose sight of the journey, the crucial sense of occasion engendered on first arrival, the sense of welcome and inclusiveness, the quality of the overall operation, etc. They provide the framework for the event of the visit. We must map the normal visit to ensure everything possible is done to support the user"(Black, 2005, p. 205).
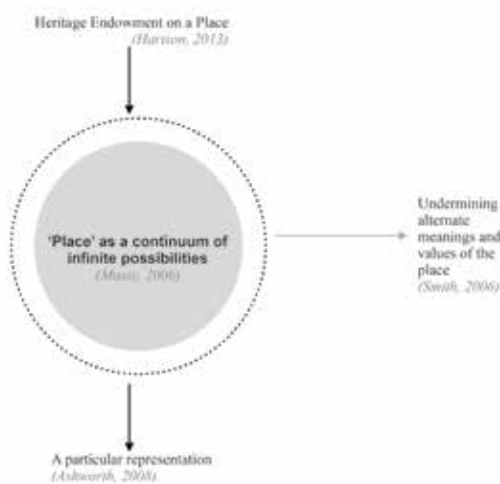

Figure 1: The consequences of heritage endowment

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Interpretation, on the other hand may follow different models based on how communication should take place and how the meanings are to be created in the heritage place. While the cultural model the communication is seen as a part of the culture, the transmission model regards communication as a transfer of knowl

edge from the communicator to receivers that follows a linear form(Hooper-Green-hill, 2000; Jamal, 2004). In this process, while interpretation can be regarded as an infinite process following the hermeneutic cycle, meaning making is a dialogue established between past and present and revision of ideas (Tilden, 2008). Silberman identifies a concerning implication of Tilden's philosophy:

> "this traditional view of heritage interpretation unquestioningly assumes the audience's basic openness to being persuaded. If performed with enough verve and ingenuity, interpretation, it is implied, will have its intended effect"(Silberman, 2013). In this way, one's epistemological and ontological framework for perceiving a heritage site may differ depending on one's viewpoint on the past, ethnic pride or animosity, class awareness, customs, or inherited memories (Robb, 1998).

As we can see, place-images may be polysemic and there may be many interpretations of a specific place dependent on people's understanding, despite the fact that the representation may be static and linear. 'Place' can be regarded as a continuum of limitless possibilities, and when the authorised discourse imposes a particular representation, the alternative meanings and values of a place are drastically diminished. Even though heritagisation process is contested and challenged due to the societal changes, the undermining process as a consequence of the interaction of heritage endowment on place-imagescan be reflected in the conventional heritage practices.

3. Research Design

As a starting point, we may argue that the representation of a heritage site is significantly influenced by the degree to which the tangible part has a meaningful relationship in interpretation alongside its immaterial counterpart. Frequently, misalignment jeopardises several negotiations at heritage sites with multiple values and meanings attributed by affiliated communities, various stakeholders, and entities. So, to discuss the notions between tangibility and intangibility and how their negotiations impact representation in the heritage sites, a theoretical framework is needed to be designed.

On the basis of the aforementioned literature research of communication models, five parameters have been made to analyze the representation at case study sites. These parameters would be aimed to investigate meaning-making, heritage-audience relationship, communication, knowledge dissemination and investigation of the representational models.

Two heritage places as Lalbagh fort and Panam city have been considered as case study sites. Case study approach has been employed for the analysis that formed the basis of this paper. Case studies, as argued by (Merriam, 2009), is an effective method for doing qualitative research that seeks to explain and interpret a phenomenon. Since one event can be interpreted in several ways, interpretive research is grounded in the idea that actuality is a social construction. This project is well-suited to case study methodology since it enables a comprehensive analysis of the case site's built environment. On the contrary, heritage is seen to be based on socially formed values, which are in turn framed by context, and this inherent understanding of the case sites is the focus of the research.

In the two case study sites, a qualitative research approach was followed that incorporates analysing the interpretive models of communication through observation and Questionnaire survey with the audiences and the stewards. Based on the parameters, the major queries with associated approaches are given in the table 1.

Figure 2 The case sites, Panam city and Lalbagh fort museum.

The case sites' interpretative models have been observed in order to analyse the implication of meaning towards audiences. The objectives of these criteria were to determine the interpretative frameworks and the nature of the meanings that are used in communication, as well as how the meanings are contested. To determine the heritage-audience relationship at the case sites, a simple questioner was used to assess the visitors' participation in the meaning-making process. This survey was also designed to examine the communication model to determine whether the learning environment is empowering and whether the visitors who came to explore the sites are cognitively and physiologically engaged. In addition, the stewards were asked how the learners' knowledge and agendas are acknowledged and built upon, as well as whether the interpretive strategies are routinely updated and altered in response to the audience's feedback. Observation also aided in determining how visitors are conceptualising the information presented. Finally, the models have been evaluated to determine whether or not they are visitor centric.

Parameters	Queries	Method
Meaning-Making	How the meanings are negotiated through communication?	Analyzing the interpretive model through observation
	What are the interpretive frameworks?	
	What are the nature of the meanings?	
Heritage-audiences relationship	How active are the audiences in the meaning-making process?	Questionnaire survey with the audiences
Communication	Is the learning environment empowering?	Questionnaire survey with the audiences and the stewards
	Are cognitively and bodily active and engaged	
	Learners' knowledge and agendas are acknowledged and built upon	
	Interpretative strategies are regularly updated and changed based on audiences' feedback	
Knowledge	How knowledge is being perceived? How visitors' construct their knowledge?	Questionnaire survey and observation
Represented-model	Is the model visitor-centered?	Analyzing the interpretive model through observation

Table 1 The parameters, queries and method to be employed

4. Findings

Following exhaustive research, data analysis, and contextual synthesis, the following models of the heritage sites have emerged. The questionnaire was conducted among 33 visitors in Panam city and 21 in Lalbagh fort. At both sites, it has been observed that meaning-making processes are unchallenged and that homogeneous meanings are represented. Audiences are conceptualised as passive recipients of interpretation in this process. While the majority of the learning is derived from the heritage-view through static and unchanging interpretative processes. The perception of knowledge as unique and "authentic", while audiences are expected to acquire authorised information in a linear fashion and are unable to construct their own meanings. This is due to the infrequency of audience research and the heritage planning's emphasis on non-interactive and unquestioned setting.

	Findings: Case Site 1 and 2
Meaning-Making	Meaning-making is uncontested
	Representation of homogenous meanings
Considering heritage-audiences	Not-distinguished
	Passive recipient of interpretation
Communication	Learning through heritage-gaze
	Inactive and passive learning
	Audiences are treated to learn the authorised knowledge in a linear process
	Static and unchanged interpretive strategies
Knowledge	Knowledge is perceived as singular and 'authentic' Constant
	Unable to construct their own meanings
Represented-model	Non-dialogic, rather receivers
	Linear process
	Non-interactive
	Audience researches are infrequently carried out
	Based on elite-knowledge and nationalist narratives

Table 2 Findings from case sites

The findings indicate that the conventional approach that has been employed in both sites encompasses somewhat nationalist and elite narrative underpinning a hegemonic discourse. Despite the fact that this was seen by the stewards to be a non-issue because they think it encourages social cohesion, the linear narratives project consensus versions and cannot accept alternate narratives. We have noticed an institutionalisation of cultural-memory network backed by a power-knowledge structure during this process.

Endorsing Innate
Values

Prioritizing Monumentality,
Aesthetics, Elite Meanings

Ruskinian Preservationist Approach Reinforcing
Materialistic Narratives
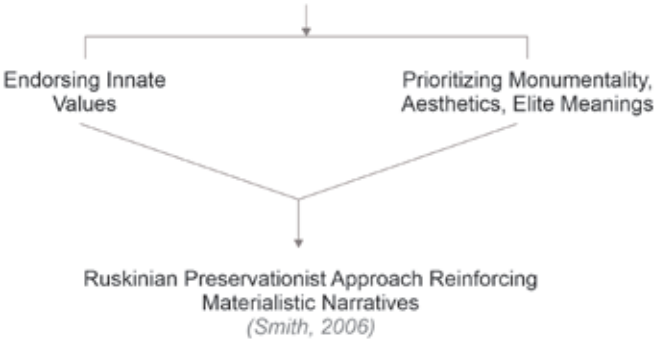*(Smith, 2006)*

Figure 3 The represented heritage models

It may be summed up that the authorised portrayal of heritage sites favours unchanging historical fact, neglecting existing values and skipping other histories, people's secondary narratives. In conclusion, the heritage endowment and interpretation on both sites promote preservationist methods by promoting intrinsic architectural and material qualities and stressing monumentality, grandeur, aesthetics, and elite historical significance.

Nationalist and Elite Narrative in the Hegemonic
Discourse

Apparently Unproblematic: Enforcing 'Social
Cohesion'

The Linear Narrative Projects Consensus
Versions

Institutionalization of Cultural-memory network
Knowledge Structure

'Authorized' Representation of Heritage Places

Static 'Historical
Actuality'

Ignoring Present
Values

Bypassing History of
Discomfort

Figure 4 The authorised representations in the heritage model

5. Recommendation

The findings indicate that the conserve as found ethos at heritage sites, which is a Russian preservationist paradigm, inhibits intergenerational social contacts and shared memories while suppressing personal recollections. The exist

ing processes exclude the individuals who generate and utilise heritage in their respective cultural places. In addition, it disregards the integration of heritage knowledge systems and cultural activities centred on individuals. As a result of specific representation, visitors' activities of meaning-making are hindered, as are their identity forms and their relationships with places.

In light of these findings, it is necessary to reappropriate conventional approaches. Recommendations include encouraging audiences to actively partici-pate in the interpretation process and viewing communication as a dynamic process of negotiation. The knowledge and agendas of the learners must be acknowledged and built upon, while the Interpretative techniques must be continually updated and improved based on the input of the audience. Thus, subjective and plural inter-pretations may be accommodated, and individuals can actively develop their own dialogical, two-way knowledge. Moreover, audience research and assessment are usually required to accommodate subjective interpretation and recognise diversity.

	Recommendations
Meaning-Making	Communication should be a constant process of negotiating meaning
	Representations through frameworks, strategies
	Subjective are plural meanings needs to be accommodated
Considering heritage-audiences	Audiences should be undifferentiated and distinguished
	Active in interpretation
Communication	An empowering learning environment
	Are cognitively and bodily active and engaged
	Learners' knowledge and agendas are acknowledged and built upon
	Interpretative strategies are regularly updated and changed based on audiences' feedback
Knowledge	Subjective, plural and perspectival
	Variable, in flux, able to be changed
	Visitors actively construct their own knowledge
Represented-model	Dialogic
	A two-way process
	Interactive
	Based on audience research and evaluation
	Visitor-centred

Figure 5 Recommendations based on the analysis

6. Conclusion

This article sought to delve deeper into the physical connection of the tradi-tional heritage paradigm prevalent in Bangladesh and the Global South and ques-tioned the magnitudes of its generic ramifications that favour materiality and

frequently necessitate specific representation. This research's theoretical framework was produced by converging several theses into the interpretative apparatus in which objects, places, and 'things' have cultural significance and an official endowment converts them into what is often recognised as 'heritage'. In this qualitative study, interviews and observations with visitors were recorded and then decoded using interpretive theories in order to investigate the interpretation of cultural heritage sites and contribute to an understanding of the effects of the phenomenon of heritagisation in the built environment, as well as how this phenomenon interacts with the perspective of visitors. This paper investigated the inherent nature of the conventional 'heritage' paradigm by analysing two typical case examples and discussing the nuances of decolonising its definition in order to determine whether it can accommodate diverse narratives and heterogeneous representations of places in the context of Bangladesh. In conclusion, based on the developed parameters and analysis, proposals to accommodate subjective interpretation and recognise plurality are presented. This article challenges the prevalent notion that heritage is only a physical artefact or documentation by suggesting an approach that views heritage as a cultural-activity, so than the portrayal of heritage could be a present-focused cultural-power instrument.

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