Chapter 9

Heritage at the periphery

The York Street Vaults, the Roman baths, Bath

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Introduction

The Roman baths in Bath, England, provide the most extensive and complete ancient thermae in the UK, as well as forming one of the country’s major tourist attractions. The tourist zone, however, does not encompass the entire site; significant spaces are barred to visitors, or opened on only rare occasions, including underground vaults, connecting tunnels and other enclosures of historical significance. These spaces, some of which contain valuable but not fully investigated archaeology, are used for a wide range of purposes, typically storage (of both archaeological and contemporary material) and servicing (plumbing, back-of-house circulation and access). These service spaces embody a very different aesthetic from the curated tourist zone, which disguises or attempts to shift into the background the non-Roman. Within the back-of-house spaces, including the York Street vaults, no such curatorial or presentational care is taken; however, managers and curators at the baths have long considered extending the tourist zone to encompass the vaults, or parts of them, raising questions about the extent to which they could or should be changed and adapted for public ‘consumption’. A small group of academics was invited to study the vaults as part of their wider project ‘Estranged Space’. This project is an examination of the notion of spatial estrangement and the relationships between normative spaces and those that lie at or beyond the periphery – out of sight and subject to different social, economic and aesthetic values (Figure 1).

The result of the study was the creation of a site-specific installation and a short film of that installation, Datum, which seeks to celebrate the space as found, rather than considering it as a primarily Roman site onto which has accumulated a series of unwanted layers and interventions. The study therefore forced an inquiry into notions of heritage and authenticity, and ways in which the entire space could be re-presented, indeed, the project became one of making a virtue of the peripheral status of the vaults.
and suggesting how their unique aesthetic and spatial qualities could be considered to have an authenticity all their own. Through the medium of light and film, the project team sought to frame not just the Roman but the form, texture and materiality of the whole space; drawing attention to, rather than hiding, the changes that have been, and continue to be, visited upon the site.

This work deploys a similar attitude to place as that which formed the background to a set of interventions by archaeologists Christopher Tilley et al. in Cornwall, UK, in the 1990s; this study of a Stone Age settlement at Leskernick Hill used both traditional archaeological techniques and practices of creative interpretation deployed by landscape artists such as Andy Goldsworthy. The archaeologists’ visual records and ‘in situ transformation’ (which included painting, wrapping and framing key stones) were designed to provoke an engagement with the site in a way that was more immediate and palpable than the production of professional diagrams, and more meaningful than nostalgic recreation (Tilley et al. 2000: 60). Further, the archaeologists came to consider that their imagery required a degree of distortion, along the lines of Cubist art, in order to draw out and present particular meanings: ‘We quickly learnt the obvious, that the “real” image is not enough . . . we needed to play tricks, to distort, to emphasise’ (ibid: 58). The writers argue, convincingly, that the outcomes of their study are simultaneously aids to interpreting the past and contemporary cultural works: ‘By being both of the past and the present, we would claim that it enriches our understanding of both in a recognition of the multiplicity of meanings in a particular place and a particular landscape’ (ibid: 61). The work at the Roman baths is underpinned by similar motivations and methods to those described by Tilley et al.: a creative response to found space, reframing it in order to capture and reinforce something of the experience of the place, and a determination to find (and legitimise) connections between past and present.

Historical background

The York Street vaults lie just beyond the southern edge of the principal space within the Roman baths museum complex. These spaces once provided a mix of baths and courtyard zones during the Roman period; spaces that were gradually covered until
excavated in the late nineteenth century. In the meantime, however, the Georgians had built over the site, sinking basements onto what had once been the Roman ground level. An enclosed space since the 1890s, these vaults now provide a zone for water pipes, gas mains, electrical cabling and pumping systems, as well as for miscellaneous storage.

The site of the Roman baths has been in almost continuous use for more than two millennia, and arguably since c.5,000 BC, as described within The City of Bath World Heritage Site Management Plan (2011: 80). Sited near a curve of the river Avon, geo-thermally heated water rises from a spring, which was contained and formalised under the Roman occupation around AD 67–70. This early intervention grew over a period of three centuries into a mix of sacred and bathing spaces, falling into disuse and collapse after the Roman administration came to an end. By the eleventh century the spring was back in use, although the original Roman structures, larger than any subsequent bathing establishment on the site, remained buried and unknown. Evidence of Roman origins came to light during building works throughout the eighteenth century and artefacts continued to be unearthed on a broadly ad hoc basis until city architect C.E. Davis began a systematic study in the 1870s; over the following two decades the extent of the Roman complex was discovered, including the presence of the Great Bath which lies at its centre. During the latter years of the nineteenth century a series of land purchases led to a programme of demolition and the construction of an architectural “frame” in a classical idiom, in addition to buildings erected during the Georgian period. The complex of buildings which now cover the site (an entire storey above the Roman ground level) were erected over a period of two centuries by architects including John Wood (Elder and Younger), John Palmer, C.E. Davis and J.M. Brydon; such works continued even into the 1970s.

The site of this particular study comprises a set of vaults beneath York Street: a roadway that runs east–west along the southern edge of the baths. During the Roman period much of this zone was used as an external courtyard giving access to the Great Bath (then an internal space) to the north, and further internal baths on either side (Davenport 2007). Excavated in the 1890s, the vaults have not been the subject of as much archaeological scrutiny as the rest of the site, although limited works were carried out in 1969 and 1983. Indeed, the presence of neighbouring buildings precludes investigation; a large section of the southern boundary is defined by the basement walls of Georgian buildings, while buildings without basements sit upon archaeological deposits which would be almost impossible to investigate without propping them from beneath. The vaults, then, provide a curious and unique mix of elements: Roman remains, Georgian walls and Victorian supports for the road above (the piles of which are embedded in Roman mortar). Threaded by plumbing, ducting and cabling which is both defunct and relatively new, as well as other ad hoc interventions, these spaces are used for access and the storage of artefacts, including Roman and Georgian stonework, and supplies for the visitors’ shop. The vaults are generally in poor condition; they are damp and poorly ventilated.

The vaults therefore present something of a conundrum in terms of heritage and authenticity. They form part of the Scheduled Ancient Monument and Grade 1 status of the wider baths/museum complex, and the value of the archaeology is undoubted, but the bulk of this 550m² site is non-Roman. Rather than privileging the Roman over...
any other period, the vaults provide a candid record of human use and occupation over a prolonged period of time. One can see how stone used in Georgian buildings above ground has been re-used in the construction of the vaults below. A base stone on a Roman colonnade wall has been shifted through almost 90 degrees and redeployed in the construction of a culvert, presumably during the Georgian period; indeed, the vaults are bisected by a low wall, of the very late or early post-Roman period, which has troubled archaeologists in that it bears little relation to the spatial sequences established by other structures and appears to be of dubious quality – perhaps it is a foundation for a now-absent wall constructed atop the Roman plan (ibid: 16). The York Street vaults, then, offer something beyond an extension of the Roman history/heritage/tourist zone in that they are emblematic of the many traces and modes of occupation that mark this particular site. It is this layering that makes these spaces worthy of study. In the vaults, space is not fixed and history is permitted to play itself out; the plurality of the vaults offers a compelling route to the site’s authenticity, or essence; in stark contrast to the definition of authenticity adopted by Bath City Council in the The City of Bath World Heritage Site Management Plan, which is predicated largely on notions of Roman form and materiality (2011: 26).

Heritage and authenticity

This condition is difficult to reconcile with notions of heritage and authenticity. These interrelated ideas have a long and troubled history, beginning in the nineteenth century, developing through the work of Ruskin and the advent of the Society for the Protection for Ancient Buildings and becoming redefined through the various charters and declarations of UNESCO, ICOMOS and the World Heritage Organisation. This history has been well documented by Jukka Jokilehto, David Lowenthal, Herb Stovel and others who describe the increasing importance of cultural values in determining how sites or artefacts might be considered in terms of heritage or authenticity. Briefly, this history begins with a critique of the Euro-centricity of the Athens Charter of 1931 and its replacement by the more inclusive Charter of Venice more than 30 years later. Although Venice established more clearly the importance of heritage and the care in which present generations should take to preserve it for the benefit of future generations, the charter was silent on, for example, matters concerning ritual reconstruction, the care and maintenance of timber, the removal of buildings to other sites and definitions of authenticity. The wording of the introduction to the Venice Charter is especially noteworthy:

Imbued with a message from the past, the historic monuments of generations of people remain to the present day as living witnesses of their age-old traditions. People are becoming more and more conscious of the unity of human values and regard ancient monuments as a common heritage. The common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations is recognized. It is our duty to hand them on in the full richness of their authenticity.

(UNESCO-ICOMOS 1964: 1)
In spite of signalling the importance of authenticity, the Venice Charter does not define the term and only hints at how it might be applied; it has been left to subsequent international meetings for any agreement to be reached on what this vexing concept means in practice. The Nara Document, drawn up in 1994 by a panel under the direction of ICOMOS, was a significant attempt to provide clarity around the issue, significantly by emphasising the importance of values, culture and context, the role of time and evolution, and the ‘tangible and intangible’ (UNESCO-ICOMOS 1994: 1) manner in which culture and heritage can be expressed, including ‘spirit and feeling’ (ibid: 2). ‘It is thus not possible to base judgments of values and authenticity within fixed criteria,’ states the document (ibid: 2), the publication of which led to further declarations defining authenticity for specific geographical regions, such as the Americas (Declaration of San Antonio, 1996) and Africa (Authenticity and Integrity in an African Context, 2000).5 The search for a definition of authenticity, though important and well-intentioned, is fraught with difficulty; it is a ‘will-o-the-wisp’ argues Lowenthal (Lowenthal 2008: 7), in that no definition can be precise enough to encapsulate the term sufficiently well for it to be meaningful. Jokilehto and King stop short of a definition, opting instead to set out a process by which an object or place can be said to encapsulate a truth or essence (Jokilehto and King 2001:35). Of course, the search for the authentic does suggest a need to be sure that an object/place is what it is purported to be: that it is genuine. That said, Jokilehto et al. accept that authenticity, in an architectural sense, is more problematic than a simple case of establishing provenance and freedom from fakery; places and buildings are subject to change, and a building that has been subject to adaptation and repair over a period of continuous occupation cannot be said to be less authentic than a building in its original (or mythically original) state.

The test of authenticity, then, becomes located somewhere at the intersection of materiality, cultural context, values, modes of occupation, land use, interpretation and identity. It is, argue Jokilehto and King, ‘a search for truth in the field of culture . . . [in which] there may be more than one response’ (ibid: 33). Such a search should be, they argue, a process through which the ‘true essence’ (ibid: 38) of a place is revealed; an essence that makes sense within the parameters of the host culture. This is a pertinent framework within which to consider the York Street vaults, which are the product of physical interventions across many centuries, some of which have been added with little sympathy for, or without the knowledge of, the historic context. Indeed, while Roman artefacts are preserved where possible, the overall condition of the vaults relies on the fact that they remain largely unseen.

The use of the word ‘essence’ is interesting. Although the authors are loosely referring to notions of genius loci, psychologists have begun to explore the term more widely in an attempt to understand how and why people consistently overlay inanimate objects with hidden attributes. The field of essentialism, largely through the work of Susan Gelman, Bruce Hood and others, aims to discover the mechanism through which people subvert, or create exceptions to, broad categories; that is, how/why abstract differences such as ownership, provenance or sentimental attachment can lead people to place greater value on one object within a category of otherwise identical objects (Gelman 2004: 404–409). Studies show that people look beyond observable features, ‘posing a reality
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beyond appearances’ (author’s italics) in a search for ‘deeper causes and alternative construals’ (ibid: 407). Such a mechanism would explain, for example, why a work by Rembrandt fetches more at auction than an identical painting by a lesser known artist, or a piece of stone worked by Roman hands is given a value beyond that accorded to other members of the same category such as stone worked in the Victorian period. Hood’s experiments show, for example, that children choose to keep the original sentimental object, such as a comfort blanket, rather than an identical copy manufactured in a ‘copying machine’ – a piece of laboratory equipment designed to fool children into thinking any object can be replicated in exact detail (Hood and Bloom 2008: 455–462). It is not yet clear if the mechanisms of human psychology include the notion that inanimate objects become endowed with essences, or invisible properties, that make them unique within their category, or if this is learned behaviour; but it is clear that people, for one reason or another, regularly elevate particular objects over others for reasons beyond the visible. ‘Children might further believe that this essence is not copied by the duplicating machine, and hence prefer the original item – not because of the individual [object] per se, but because of a property that the individual is thought to possess’ (ibid: 461).

Work on heritage in the US points towards ways in which notions of essences, or invisible properties, can work in terms of place and reconstruction. The recreation of New Salem in Illinois is instructive for the way in which a patently artificial site can be invested with special properties through the act of storytelling. Edward Bruner’s account of the history of New Salem is instructive (Bruner 1994: 397–415). New Salem was a village in which Abraham Lincoln lived as a young man for six years in the 1830s. However, the settlement had a life of only a single decade, and it was abandoned in 1839; indeed, by the time Lincoln had become a national hero there was barely any trace of New Salem at all. ‘The site was simply a barren plot of ground on the top of a hill with no remaining buildings or markers’ (ibid: 400). Around 1900 a range of interest groups began the process of recreating the village; New Salem was reconstructed as a best guess and completed in 1919, only to undergo further reconstruction in the 1930s. That re-recreation survives today. The role of authenticity at New Salem is not to make the best use of original artefacts, nor is it to provide a facsimile of the original village – indeed, the village embodies certain features which make it an implausible model of the original settlement, including electrical power, modern sanitation and the fact that the recreation is (and looks) older than the place it recreates. Nonetheless, Bruner argues that New Salem provides visitors with a credible experience of what they imagine an 1830s village to have been like. Authenticity, argues Bruner, is ‘a struggle’ (ibid: 403), and he goes on to explore how a tourist’s experience of a site can be made to feel authentic, even if the site itself is a recreation (ibid: 404). ‘The particular pasts that tourists create/imagine at historic sites may never have existed. But historic sites like New Salem do provide visitors with the raw material (experiences) to construct a sense of identity, meaning, attachment and stability’ (ibid: 411). That is, people are provided with a context in which ‘positing a reality beyond appearance’ is the purpose of the site.

Notions of heritage and authenticity seem to imply that there is a deep-rooted human need for objects and places to be endowed with a value, even if that value is
entirely a socio-psycho-cultural invention. That is, that objects and places might have no intrinsic worth other than the invisible quality, which a culture chooses to project upon it. However, the essence or truth of an object or place appears to be elusive in that it can be found in a certificate of originality, a shared experience or identity, a narrative/myth or even in what a power structure (the authority) deems it to be. In terms of the Roman baths, the York Street vaults are not lacking in authenticity (everything is what it purports to be) and the spaces serve as a candid record of adaptation, repair and intervention over time; their aesthetic qualities, however, are not those typically associated with heritage. These qualities, though, might be thought of as an asset in terms of how heritage might be presented or interpreted.

US archaeologist Michael Shanks has developed the concept of ‘symmetrical archaeology’ (Shanks 2007: 589–596) which offers a route through this problematic field by posing an alternative framework through which culture links past and present. Shanks argues that archaeologists have traditionally worked in an asymmetrical manner. The assumption is that the past lies beneath the ground, awaiting discovery, and that it is the archaeologist’s task to reveal it in all its unmediated glory. Archaeologists, he says, attempt to be impartial, putting themselves at the service of the past; hence asymmetrical. Shanks argues, however, that reality is more balanced than this; that archaeologists are active participants in the ways in which meaning is attached to the past. Not only do they decide where, when and how to dig, they decide what is preserved, what is removed, where it is removed to, how it is presented and what stories the artefact tells. These decisions are all reasonable and natural, but also culturally and socially determined. The past and the present exist in an uneasy but equal relationship; hence symmetrical. If this new framework is to be accepted, in which the past is both discovered and created, Shanks argues that two things must be acknowledged:

that the past did not end at some point, and that the past is what it was through connections that take the inquiring archaeologist beyond the confines of any particular and local context, into an anthropological and historical field of comparative examples and connections. The past, in this attitude, is thus a resource as much as source. Again, archaeologists do not discover the past, but treat the remains as a resource in their own creative (re)production or representation.

(ibid: 592)

The glimpse

The York Street vaults provide a useful space in which to test this idea of using artefacts from the past (the ancient and the very recent) as a prompt for creativity: re-presenting a space in order to suggest a different reading. Although the vaults lie within the estate of the listed building, and form a significant space adjacent to the heart of this busy tourist destination, the Roman is not highlighted or curated in such a way that brings it to special attention. Was this a condition, we asked, which could be valued in and of
itself? In other words, might we establish a methodology for seeking value in the entire space, allowing a sense of authenticity to become present without prejudicing contemporary interventions? Jokilehto and King write that historic authenticity does not mean that a building must remain in mint condition, unchanging over time; rather, they remind us that the Charter of Venice and subsequent declarations concerning authenticity may take notice of ageing, accrued patinas, changes and the ‘valid contributions of all periods’ (UNESCO-ICOMOS 1964: 2). However, when groups of students have visited the vaults their responses typically range from unease to shock – that the proximity of the Roman with something as banal as modern plumbing is somehow in poor taste or an act of disrespect.6 The purpose of the project became one of attempting to show that all interventions on the site might be considered ‘valid contributions’ to a sense of place rather than impediments to understanding only the Roman. The attempt to find meaning in the entire space (the space as a cultural artefact that had evolved over the course of many centuries) would offer a counterpoint to conventional practice that creates hierarchies of value, typically based on the notion that older artefacts are deserving of greater respect than newer ones.

The project became a question of how to frame this multiplicity in a positive way: to create a mode of viewing which presented all periods as contributing equally to a unified space. Further, the team determined (unlike Tilley et al.) not to make a physical intervention, as the intervention itself would add to the accumulation of periods it wished to re-present. There was a sense, therefore, that any re-reading would be one of representation or the introduction of ephemera, such as light or sound. It is a natural peculiarity of the vaults that they act as a camera obscura, whereby inverted images of tourists visiting the Great Bath are projected deep into the space, an effect which is appreciated only in darkness – and one which is magnified through photography with shutter speeds of two minutes or more (Figure 2). This discovery prompted a creative process in which artificial light was introduced selectively, concentrating on the architectural section.

In much the same way as geologists establish the composition of a site by extracting a core, the researchers constructed a device to project a vertical band of light onto the surfaces of the vaults, illuminating the strata of the space while leaving everything else in darkness (Figure 3). Designed to capture the spirit of Merleau-Ponty’s observation that we can only ever perceive ‘an enigmatic world of which we catch a glimpse . . . but only ever from points of view that hide as much as they reveal’ (Merleau-Ponty 2008: 53–54), the lighting device revolves to reveal the vaults through a series of narrow illuminated strips. When viewed from behind the light source itself, the projected strip of light maintains its vertical coherence; when viewed obliquely (as the observer moves away from the light source) the strip fragments as it wraps over complex and intersecting surfaces, distorting and dispersing the view. Such abstractions are reminiscent of the work of László Moholy-Nagy, whose short films suggest spatial characteristics created through the manipulation of light and shade, and that of Paul Klee, who celebrated spatial ambiguity and questioned the role of the view (Naegele 2001: 7).
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Figure 2
Camera obscura image (inverted) taken from within the vaults.

Figure 3
The lighting device: a surveyor's tripod with custom-made lighting projector.
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Importantly, the light installation was not intended as an end in itself, but rather as an event to be filmed. The film, therefore, is the output. There were practical reasons for this: the combination of the carefully controlled light source, which kept the majority of the vaults in darkness, and a space characterised by uneven floor surfaces and trip hazards would make for an inherently unsafe public event. The installation was designed, therefore, as an experiment with viewing angle and camera-light relationships, resulting in a decision to position the light source at regular intervals upon the long and short sections of the vaults, while giving the camera complete freedom in terms of viewing point.

The effect of the installation and 12-minute film is to remove any sense of context, transforming, fragmenting and abstracting the space into a void which is broken by illuminated and enigmatic glimpses (Figure 4). Presenting and framing the vaults in this manner is an act of curation, but one which requires the viewer to piece together visual clues, sensations and impressions concerning the fundamental elements of the place: texture, colour, materiality, volume, scale and the archaeological timeline. The viewer is not able to perceive the space in its entirety but is, instead, limited to assembling a succession of ephemeral concentrations of texture and colour, emerging

**Figure 4**
Three pairs of stills from the film *Datum.*
from and retreating into the darkness. Socially accepted notions of good/bad, beautiful/ugly, acceptable/unacceptable become suspended as one waits for something like a complete picture to emerge. The film is structured as a series of reveals that shift from glimpses of spatial volume through to the scale of detail and texture. Only slowly can the viewer create a mental model of the place, but without the framework of values and aesthetic judgements one naturally brings to the act of seeing when presented with a wider, unmediated view. Thus the vaults are presented not as a relic from Antiquity, scarred by later interventions but rather as a place which bears the marks of human activity from Antiquity to the present.

Conclusion

Bath’s York Street vaults, rather than being restricted to the status of unseen periphery to the tourist zone of the Roman baths, can be considered, instead, as a resource for ‘creative (re)production or representation’. Their condition as a place of continuing change and use can be imagined as a space of symmetry, where the past and the present co-exist comfortably. Like Tilley et al., the severe spatial editing represented by the installation/film involved a degree of distortion and emphasis – a necessary ‘trick’ in order to achieve what Gelman describes as ‘positing a reality beyond appearances’. That new reality, though from a point of view which hides as much (if not more) than it reveals, suggests that the York Street vaults can be seen to embody a coherence, even beauty, not normally granted them. Further, the work attempts to negotiate a way through elusive notions of heritage and authenticity by appropriating the past as raw material for creative endeavour, as well as considering all pasts, not just the Roman, as contributing to a sense of place. This is an oblique consideration of heritage, but one which seeks to maximise the role of the intangible and create a positive response to questions of authenticity, essence and change.

This is an attempt to limit, frame and control the manner in which the York Street vaults are seen, thereby setting the parameters through which the space can be judged as having value or meaning. This can be understood through Jokilehto and King’s observation that ‘the issue of authenticity is not just a matter of form, but it is essentially a question of meaning’. In these terms, the York Street vaults embody a quality not found within the non-peripheral Roman baths themselves. They can be read as a complete space rather as a frame to privilege a single strata of history. There is, of course, an irony in presenting the vaults as a unified space via a process of fragmenting and editing it, but this is part of the necessary process of creative re-presentation, as described by Tilley et al. The use of light installation, projection and film as site analysis tools helps establish a method through which other contested, found, estranged or peripheral spaces might be examined, providing a set of tactics including: the role of light, scale and texture; sightlines; and decisions, like the symmetrical archaeologist, about what is revealed and what is not.

The peripheral space might enjoy, therefore, the potential for re-reading and re-presentation that makes its status a cause for celebration. This act of curation, a
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process of spatial editing, presents the York Street vaults as a rich palimpsest, a text which has been continually rewritten, erased and edited. The alternative, as described as Bruner, is ‘to fix history, to solidify and to simplify it’ (Bruner 1994: 403). Rather than challenging received notions of heritage and authenticity, this work seeks to find a way in which creative practice and art-based ideas concerning place, can become compatible with them.

Notes

1 A total of 839,994 people visited the baths in the period 2008–09 (1 per cent more than for the previous year). Heritage Services Annual Review 2008/09. Bath and North East Somerset Council.
2 ‘Estranged Space’ is a small research network founded by Mathew Emnett of the University of Plymouth, David Littlefield of the University of the West of England and Ken Wilder of the University of the Arts, London. This group was granted Artist in Residence status at the Roman Baths, Bath, 2009–11. The short film Datum (2012), discussed in this paper, is one of the principal outcomes of the study.
5 Both documents are published by UNESCO-ICOMOS.
6 Two groups of, approximately, 15 undergraduate students from the Department of Planning and Architecture, University of the West of England, visited the site in December 2009 and December 2010.

Bibliography


