

Best Practice Guide 15

# Heritage Interpretation in the Public Realm

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*Designed for screens – no need to print*

# Introduction

The public realm is possibly the most rewarding and the most challenging location for any heritage interpretation, and can be a game-changer in urban regeneration.

It's the chance to tell everyone why this place is special. However, your audience are passers-by with a variety of unrelated objectives and distractions, so good planning is essential.

Your job may not require you to interpret any heritage yourself, but you may need to recognise good (or bad!) interpretive planning and design when you see it. Maybe you are an architect, conservation officer, landscape manager or town planner, commissioning or approving a design for interpretation as part of a bigger project.

Methods that work well in a visitor attraction can fail in public spaces. This guide will help you know what to look for, and what questions to ask of others. It should also be useful to anyone delivering interpretation in public spaces.

*We protect things that we value, but how can we value what we don't understand?*



Did a team of West Auckland miners win the first World Cup?

## Opportunities in public realm interpretation:

- Add character in place-making, for tourism and economic development.
- Add social value by connecting with hard-to-reach audiences.
- Increase local appreciation, boost civic pride and reduce vandalism.
- Preserve the story when the heritage itself cannot be saved.
- Interpret sites and events in their true location.



Spectacular light-shows draw non-traditional audiences to learn about heritage whilst being entertained. 'Arrivals and Departures' describing centuries of continental migration through Hull, was projected onto The Deep and viewed across the watery entrance.

## Challenges not faced elsewhere:

- Audiences that differ by morning, afternoon and night-time.
- Social pressures restricting or distorting interactions.
- Frustration –venting against other departments sharing your logo.
- No closing time to deter undesirable interactions!
- Settings as changeable as the local economy.
- Economic benefits that are indirect and slow to materialise.

*Using empty shop-fronts as temporary exhibition space maintains vibrancy during urban regeneration.*



It's better to make attractive and accessible objects suitable for climbing on, than try to prevent interaction. What child could resist riding the Ninewells Dragon as it straddles Dundee's old tramlines?



# More than information

Less is more, but information alone is not enough. We aim to raise awareness, arouse curiosity and inspire appreciation.

Heritage Interpretation, as the title suggests, involves translation. We take information about our cultural, natural or built heritage, and translate it into a form that provokes an emotional reaction to convey meaning within our audience.

*The cultural grandparents of Heritage Interpretation are teachers, advertisers, artists and journalists.*

*In different settings, the strengths of each one predominate.*



Saving lives or killing business?  
Hull fish-wives were rewarded with death threats and social exclusion.

Local heroes are commonly celebrated in bill-board-like murals within their community setting.



## Tools of the trade

You will have experienced a wide range of interpretation tools in your personal life, but may not have recognised them as such.

Orientation panels help tourists understand what they see.



Panels can be vertical, horizontal, or any angle in between. This mosaic floor map aids orientation, and chunky gallows brackets mirror their panel content.



Stepping stone messages help modern visitors imagine life under siege at Bedford.

Well known interpretation tools, as used in museums, nature reserves and visitor attractions, include:

- Graphic panels
- Art & Sculpture
- Performance: music, drama, puppetry, poetry, comedy
- Living History, re-enactment
- Guided walks and trails
- Digital media

With careful planning they can work in public settings too, but some tools only work well with a managed audience.

*Effective design is almost invisible to the untrained eye. It just works.*



The public realm interpretation toolbox also includes:

- Architectural design
- Paving materials
- Soft landscaping
- Street furniture
- Themed play equipment

Can you guess what Marshall Son & Co made?





## Passive communication

Subliminal interpretation permeates large spaces, following a theme or sub-themes that set the scene. This style of story-telling works at a subconscious level to reach busy people whose attention is on other things. You may think of it as place-making.

Discovering clues and solving the heritage puzzle appeals to our inner detective, transforming passive interpretation into active learning for those who take the bait!



A medieval litter bin maintains the mood on Bedford Castle mound.



**Spot the difference.**  
Paving in Dundee reflects an earlier structure.



# Active participation

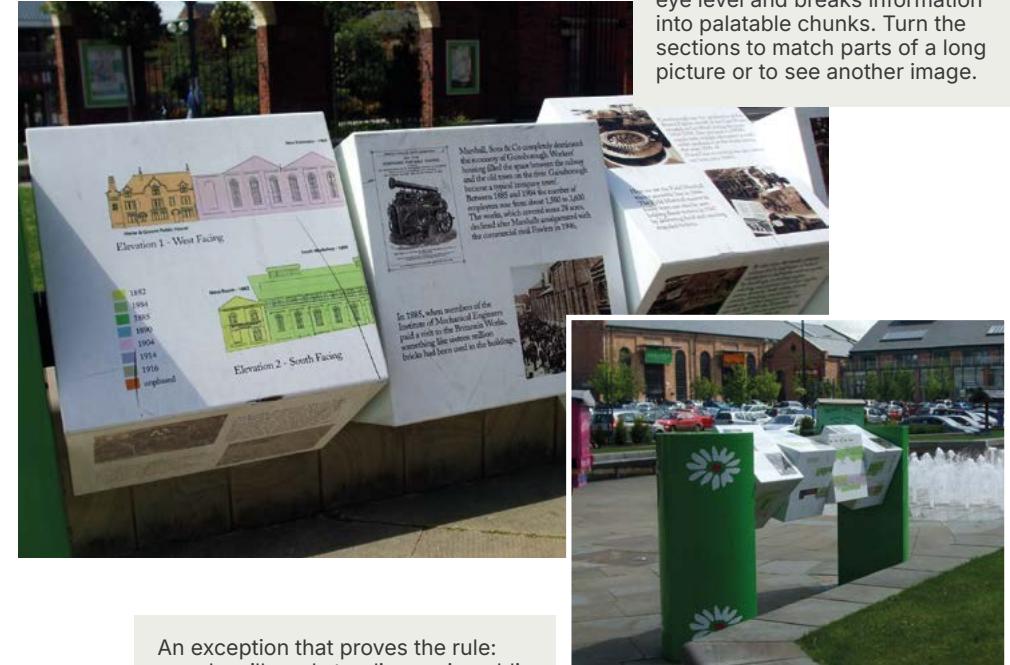
Most interpretation involves active participation—reading, touching, listening, following and thinking.

First catch your audience. Billboards and shop window displays lead the way in competing above the visual noise of urban settings.

Busy places are social spaces, where group hierarchies are shaped or reinforced. Standing out from the crowd is risky: any lone local adult is far more self-conscious than tourists, teenagers or families.

Make every word earn its keep, remembering that reading takes effort and is best done sitting quietly with a cuppa.

Teachers know that exploration and discovery are the best lessons. Artworks, 3-D models and image trails tell stories in a language-free accessible way.



An exception that proves the rule: people will read standing up in public when sharing jokes and cultural memories. Crowds generate curiosity and attract yet more people.

*"Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short."*

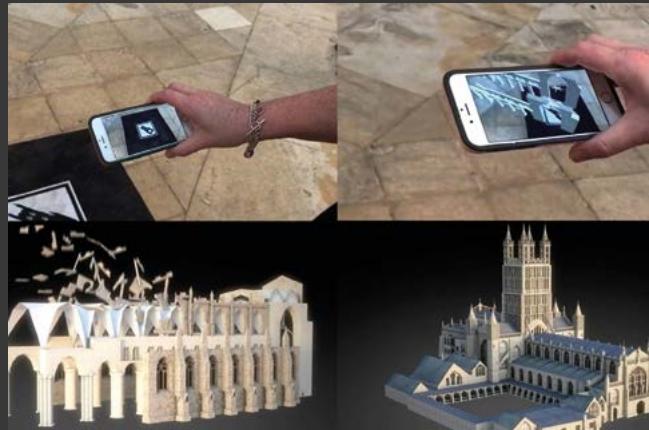
Henry David Thoreau

# Interactive media

Permanent physical interpretation does not suit every site or every story.

Digital technology can lift interpretation to another level, allowing people to use their own electronic devices to access multimedia information or improve disability access. However, it must be carefully designed to consider who will use it, how and where it will be accessed, and how it is maintained. Technology and public expectations are constantly evolving, so make sure you have the means to keep up with progress.

A mobile device can lead the audience on a trail of discovery and enable interpretation over huge or scattered sites. When circumstances change, the content can be updated remotely, so is more flexible than fixed interpretation.



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'Mrs Doig' waits for stragglers on her walking tour of Edinburgh.

The most interactive of all interpretation devices is the human being.

It works reliably in all weathers, reacts to changing situations and adapts accordingly in real time. An inspirational guide can personalise the heritage experience in ways that no other medium ever could.

Living history or other public performances bring the space alive, adding a sense of occasion and attracting interest from bystanders. This can be an excellent way to interpret sites where story-telling is time-limited for whatever reason.

Live performance can even transform the audience into the interpretation medium!



## Points to consider

- Maximise contact by noting where desire lines intersect and which direction people are moving.
- Each element of a trail should tell a story.
- Busy spaces promote anxiety, whilst greenery and water have a calming effect.
- Remember the weather! Consider angles of sunshine and shade through the year, and the social impact of rain.
- Aim to complement nearby features. You cannot compete.
- Be mindful of anti-social behaviour and litter traps!

## Location, location, co-location

Make use of existing routes where people are comfortable to slow down or stop.

Can you turn a convenient space into a landmark rendezvous point, or turn your heritage landmark into a social area? A landscape architect could help you understand how the space works, and find the right orientation for a design.

Consider physical and social safety for learning through play. Encouraging families to explore interpretation

together can also reach the 'inner child' of adult groups, and maybe even some teenagers! Accept that people will interact in ways that suit their purpose, which may not match yours.

Fitness app data heat maps, or old-fashioned observation of people and worn pathways, will show where to maximise your audience or find a quiet corner.



# Success is built on firm foundations

Look for these building blocks when commissioning or examining heritage interpretation projects.



# Further reading:

- Wikipedia's entry for Heritage Interpretation includes web-links to many interesting articles from around the world.
- Interpret Europe (2021). Heritage interpretation for architects and landscape architects, Potsdam: Interpret Europe.
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## Biography

**Geraldine Mathieson MAHI** is a freelance interpreter specialising in industrial and social heritage, predominantly in the voluntary sector. She has also served many years on the planning committee of a large unitary council.

Cover image: Ninewells Dragon

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