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Designing the past: the National Trust as social-material agency

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Abstract

The National Trust was founded in 1895 for 'the preservation of places of historic interest or natural beauty'. While the distinction between the cultural and the natural seemed obvious at that time and members and visitors were not even implicated actors, we argue that the National Trust may be better understood as a co-constructed network effect of the social and material, which in turn affords social-material agency. There are currently 3.5 million members of the National Trust and 50 million visitors every year to National Trust properties, which include the largest collection of gardens in the world and over 300 historic houses and open-air properties.

While the notion of design itself may seem to be an exemplar of the humanist love of agency, we argue (following Latour) that traditional notions of agency, which were asymmetrically distributed to the human actors, take insufficient cognisance of evident occasions of 'material agency' (Pickering, 1995) and the site of conservation is one site whereby the agency produced by social-material assemblages seems interesting and revealing.

Whereas the social-material practices of design may seem in some tension with those of conservation, we argue in this paper that a close analysis of a particular site of conservation shows a manifold of 'designing' actors. Whatever the National Trust conserves could be considered as an example of particular and situated designs condensed from the interactions of humankind and nature. Similarly the visitor experience is also designed. While conservation can imply a certain social-material agency, it is much less well understood how conservation co-produces agency, and how these network effects serve the purposes of conservation by the Trust, visitors and other actors through the agency of the social and material. This paper will reveal some of the social-material practices which afford a visit to a property and what such visits afford the social-material practices of the National Trust.

Introduction

The National Trust is one of the foremost heritage conservation bodies in the world. Founded in 1895, the National Trust is a charitable organisation and is completely independent of government (The National Trust, 2007). It holds the largest collection of gardens in the world - over 200 gardens and 67 landscape parks in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is 'the greatest collection of gardens ever held by one body' (Thomas, 1987, p 11). It also has over 300 historic houses, 612,000 acres (248,000 hectares) of countryside and 700 miles of coastline.

These conserved places are sites of social-material assemblages, brought together not only in the past but also in the present as visitor attractions. Yet despite the fact that visitors are in constant interaction with these physical places and the artefacts they contain, leisure and tourism studies have tended to engage with the visual and the 'symbolic value' of materialism.

> Here is a paradox. Tourism abounds with things ... And yet, if you read all the past and current textbooks on tourism… you will discover that these things are not held to be very significant…tourist things tend to be significant only in what they represent; as a

meaningful set of signs and metaphors… (Franklin, 2003, p. 97).

This 'cultural turn' epitomised by MacCannell (1976) on 'authenticity' and Urry (1990) on the 'tourist gaze' is giving way to a 'performance turn' (Jóhannesson, 2005) - a shift of focus of tourism research that depicts places as having multidimensional aspects that are in a state of fluidity. This has supported a processual view that integrates the material, social and cultural as relational accomplishments. Drawing on Actor-Network Theory, Jóhannesson suggests that ANT's 'emphasis on networks and network practices would seem to fit well the complex relations involved in tourism' (Jóhannesson, 2005, p. 134). However, this notion of actors being hybrids and thus enabling agency to be a heterogeneous accomplishment is still contested.

In this paper we show that sites of conservation co-produce agency, and that network effects serve the purposes of conservation *and* visitation. By discussing two National Trust properties which are located in the South East of England - Sissinghurst Castle Garden and Saddlescombe Farm, we reveal examples of the social-material practices which afford a visit to a property and what such visits afford the social-material practices of the National Trust.

The National Trust

A conventional study of the Trust, adopting traditional notions of agency would asymmetrically distribute agency only to the human actors. It would no doubt refer to the founders, Sir Robert Hunter, Miss Octavia Hill and Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley. In addition, the contemporary governance by the 52 members of the Council and a Board of Trustees would be mentioned, as would the 4,300 members of staff (National Trust, 2008). Perhaps reference would be made to the members of the 7 advisory panels who use their professional expertise to assist with policy development and advise on major acquisitions and projects. Recognition of the 52,000 volunteers who contributed 2.3 million hours in 2007 –08 would be vital, as would acknowledgement of the benefactors who donated almost £58 million in the same year. The 3.5 million members would be cited in acknowledgment of the popularity of the Trust and finally the 12 million visits to pay for entry properties and the estimated 50 million visits to the open-air properties would be highlighted.

However, we believe that the National Trust may be better understood as a co-constructed network effect of the social *and* material and we will demonstrate that this affords social-material agency. The founders, for example, were concerned about the impacts of uncontrolled industrialisation and development in England and taking their experiences as a case in point; we will show that the conventional study just described takes insufficient note of material agency.

Sir Robert Hunter, at the young age of 24, was Honorary Solicitor of the Commons Preservation Society and he fought several legal battles in the Courts to protect common lands from enclosure by the Lords of the Manor. A notable achievement was the saving of six thousand acres (2,500 hectares) of Epping Forest in 1874 (Fedden, 1968). This opportunity had arisen following his success in 1866 in a newspaper essay-competition on the subject of 'Commons and the means of preserving them for the public' (Gaze, 1988).

Octavia Hill was a pioneer in housing reform and it was through this that she came to recognise the importance of open spaces. Her friend, John Ruskin had consulted her for advice on using his inherited fortune for the public good and she had proposed plans for the purchase, renovation and

subsequent renting out of slum properties. The irony of the names of the first acquisitions, Paradise Place and Freshwater Place was not lost on Gaze (1988) and he notes that it was at the latter that she transformed a patch of waste land adjoining the court into a children's playground. From this idea developed the wider concept of 'Open air sitting rooms for the poor' (Fedden, 1968) in which she was supported with legal advice from Robert Hunter.

Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley carried out much of his ministry in the parish of Crosthwaite in the Lake District (Gaze, 1988). He earned the epithet 'Guardian of the Lakes' due to his fight against encroachment by the railways. Concerned about the sale of Lodore Falls, south of Keswick, he had contacted the Commons Preservation Society and it was this network of social reformers and their experiences of industrialisation that came together to constitute the National Trust. This network being afforded by their desire to preserve spaces *for and because of people.*

The aim of the new organisation was 'the preservation of places of historic interest or natural beauty'. No doubt the dichotomy of the cultural and the natural seemed obvious at that time, but this distinction never really existed. There were no pristine locations remaining in England to be protected – anthropogenic influences had prevailed throughout the country.

Canon Rawnsley was staying in Barmouth, Wales when he received the draft articles of association of the newly formed Trust and his host, a Mrs Talbot, immediately commented that Dinas Oleu should be secured for the public. Dinas Oleu 'was – and is – a steep, gorse-clad, rocky fell of less than 5 acres[1] above 'unbeautiful Barmouth' but with splendid views over Cardigan Bay' (Gaze, 1988, p. 35). Following this first acquisition, the second also followed the putting of pen to paper in the heterogeneous hybrid of letter writing. Ten days after the formal incorporation of the National Trust, a fellow minister who had the living at the clergy house in Alfriston, East Sussex wrote to Rawnsley seeking to protect the property, as many years earlier the Bishop had authorised its demolition.

After the Second World War a number of gardens were acquired, Stourhead House, with its garden and estate, for example, was bequeathed to the Trust in 1946. The garden, designed by Henry Hoare 11 is one of the finest landscape gardens in the world.

> Hoare dammed a stream joining some small pools to make a chain of lakes, four of which, and one in particular, form the central feature of the artificial landscape. From 1741 – 65, he built the bridge, three classical temples, the Grotto and the Rock Arch, all of which were to be seen in progressing round the lake, one at a time, as one walked from light to shade, from gloom to shine (Thomas, 1979, p. 65).

Clearly, any distinction by the National Trust between a place of historic interest and one of natural beauty was no longer of consequence, gardens being examples of the social and material, *par excellence*. Fox and Edwards (2008) note that a garden differs from many other types of visitor attraction in that the visitor experience offered cannot be standardised because the imagescape is in a state of constant transformation. The anthropogenic actions creating and shaping a garden interact with the agency of nature. They describe how 'a tree may have grown naturally in a location or may have been transplanted there by a gardener. Conversely, a self-seeded plant may have been overlooked by a gardener or may have deliberately left *in situ* as part of the design' (Fox and Edwards, 2008, p 223).

Subsequent acquisitions by the National Trust through, for example, the Neptune Coastline campaign launched in 1965 and the acquirement of Mendips, John Lennon's childhood home in Liverpool, an icon of mass popular culture, illustrate the importance of diverse assemblages of social-material agency to modern conservation.

Sissinghurst Castle

Using the example of Sissinghurst Castle, we will demonstrate how the agency produced by social-material assemblages is interesting and revealing. Harold Nicolson and Vita Sackville-West bought the ruins of the Castle in 1930. Nicholson designed the layout of the garden and his wife, Vita, the planting. The garden was not a traditional walled garden, but a group of buildings and ruins, which he incorporated into the design. These 'designing' actors together produced the final layout of small gardens and features (Figure 1).

[pic]

Figure 1. The design of Sissinghurst Castle Garden (Source: National Trust)

Nicholson wrote in his diary –

> Viti and I measure the kitchen garden to discover how much paling will be required to make it square. I fiddle about with the vista problem. Obviously what would be good in a teleological sense would be to put the end of the main nuttery walk at the end of a main vista running from the new angle of the kitchen garden, past the cottage garden…. Only this cuts angularly across the holly hedge in our little cottage garden, and fits in obtusely with the rest of the design. That is what is such a bore about Sissinghurst. It is magnificent but constantly obtuse (Nicholson, cited in Brown, 1990, p. 66-68).

The Nicholsons planned their garden from the four-story high tower which was an Elizabethan gate house. The Tower affords today's visitors a cascade of affordances. First, the spiral staircase in the tower affords anticipation as one climbs up and around to an opening on each floor. On the first floor is Vita's writing room which remains virtually unchanged since she immortalised the tower in her sonnet, 'Absence'. The visitor can see that fresh flowers are still placed on her desk every day (Brown, 1990).

The top of the tower affords a wonderful view of the garden, but it is a very different perspective and experience from being in the garden at ground level. It is literally a birds-eye view and one sees the garden in a plan view. Additionally, instead of being bound within the garden, feeling the leaves brushing against you and smelling the scents of the individual plants, the visitor can look beyond the garden to the surrounding hills and feel the breeze on their face.

Prior to 1967 when Sissinghurst Castle was donated to the Trust, visitor numbers to the garden, when the Nicholsons had opened it for charity, never exceeded 28,000. In the first year of opening by the Trust, they increased to 67,000. On opening, the paths were adapted for the public, but then additional facilities were introduced to afford greater visitor numbers such as the catering, enlarged car parks etc., leading to an additional 100,000 visitors. Belatedly it was recognised that

‘…the large numbers of visitors was clearly acting to diminish the psychological, particularly the aesthetic, nature of the garden tourism experience’ (Benfield, 2001, p. 210). Therefore, impediments (Wallace, 2004) to visiting such as the introduction of a timed entry scheme and the removal of an affordance, that is the cessation of all advertising, were undertaken to limit the number of visitors.

The National Trust in designing the visitor experience at Sissinghurst Castle had failed to recognise that they had instigated a cascade of visitor affordances. In the next case study, we demonstrate how by co-designing a recently acquired site with the visitors some of these mistakes might not be repeated.

Saddlescombe Farm

Saddlescombe Farm is located near Devil’s Dyke in Sussex and is an ancient down land farm. Like the Sissinghurst estate, it has about 1000 years of history and has been designed over centuries to afford agricultural practices (Figure 2). Unlike Sissinghurst, however, where the Nicholsons converted part of the estate into a garden, its central purpose remained unchanged until acquisition by the National Trust in 1995.

[pic]

Figure 2. Saddlescombe Farm (Source: National Trust)

The visitor today can look out across Devil’s Dyke from a hill above the farm which nestles amongst the trees below. Devil’s Dyke is archaeologically significant as it is the finest example of an Anglo Saxon earthwork in the country. They can also enter the various buildings on the farm and it is this outstanding vernacular architecture which also makes Saddlescombe interesting and unique. The farm includes a 17th Century barn, a tiny poacher’s gaol, a manor house, walled garden and orchard, but from a conservation perspective, also the incongruity of a 1960’s milking parlour. However, the farm can no longer operate commercially as a dairy. One reason, by way of example is that cow slurry and waste seeped into the natural underground reservoir that supplies much of the drinking water of Brighton, a city with a population of a quarter of a million, which lies nine miles to the south.

Therefore, in considering a plethora of social, economic, geographical, archaeological and ethical affordances and impedances, the National Trust has to decide how to conserve the farm for the long term and is consequently consulting with the public and the local community as to what elements of the farm should be conserved and how it should be developed as a visitor attraction.

Unlike Sissinghurst, which opens daily from the spring until the autumn, currently there are only two ‘Open Days’ a year at Saddlescombe, which allow visitors to experience this unique attraction. In 2007, an exhibition was displayed at the open days, explaining what actions could be taken to develop the farm, in order to allow the public opportunity to comment on its future.

This is a novel approach, whereas in the past the Trust has imposed its plans and expected visitors to appreciate their implementation, now the Trust is undertaking consultation with visitors. Therefore a visitor survey was undertaken - a heterogeneous hybrid of people (researcher, interviewer, interviewee and data enterer), pens and paper (Murdoch, 1997). In the interviews, a list of possibilities was presented to visitors and they were asked, “Out of this list of things that could be done at Saddlescombe, which would you like to see incorporated into the plan for the farm?”

For the purpose of analysis the options were separated first, into those suggestions relating to the conservation of the existing material elements and secondly, those referring to a future visitor experience. Figure 3 shows that "converting existing buildings for use as a learning or educational centre" was the most popular option followed by "keeping only traditional breeds on the farm". The anachronism of modern vehicles parked within a courtyard designed for vehicles from a much earlier period, namely a horse or bullock and cart was an issue that visitors wanted changing. However, there was not the same reaction to the modern buildings.

Figure 3. The respondents support for the conservation of existing material elements (Source: National Trust)

Tracks strewn with pot holes at Saddlescombe contrast strongly with Sissinghurst Garden's immaculate paths and walkways, yet maybe they afford a more natural feel of what was once a working farm and as the data shows visitors do not expect uniform tracks and smooth, level pathways. The farm's purpose and outputs have created this environment and to be able to experience such erosion enables the visitor to appreciate and interact with their history.

Additionally, the survey considered what improvements could be made to the visitor experience (Figure 4). Social-material practices popular at other visitor attractions were most well liked, particularly having trails around the farmland demonstrating traditional farming techniques and running more special open days.

Figure 4. The respondents support for the elements of a future visitor experience (Source: National Trust)

Conclusion

Through an analysis of two National Trust sites of conservation, the role of 'designing' actors, both social and material have been demonstrated. Furthermore, it has been shown how the organisation has adapted its policies in co-creating a visitor experience. The National Trust now seeks to include the opinions of the visitors themselves, about the material aspects of the sites, as implicated actors in the design rather than simply being uninvolved recipients.

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[1] 2 hectares