HISTORY, ARCHITECTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND CULTURAL HERITAGE AND TOURISM: A RESPONSE TO ICOMOS CONFERENCE PAPERS

Judith Brine

I remember that when Dan MacCannel's *The Tourist: a new theory of the leisure class* was published in 1976 I was particularly impressed by his thesis that tourists travelled, and had so travelled since the nineteenth century, in order to define modernity. I still find it a credible theory in accounting, at least in part, for the phenomenon of tourism as we know it. Today MacCannel's text is less dated in its thesis than in its view of modernity. Hence, it leads one to speculate on what it is that tourists are currently drawing from cultural tourism to define the post-modern present. Or, conversely, what it is that those involved in the business of tourism commonly assume (consciously or unconsciously) about the present in presenting the past.

Later I should like to examine a few of the concepts which appear from the papers given to be important in this respect, but first I wish to sound a note of caution. We as a group of professionals are likely to exhibit bias in any assessment we may make of the needs of the tourist. In the course of our professional activities we support and are supported by tourism. Therefore, we probably too readily assume that tourists require copious information and much explanation about sites since this is what interests us and this is what we are expert in providing; it confirms our role as experts.

However, there are at least two kinds of touristic activities for which the tourist is more self-sufficient than is commonly acknowledged by experts; they could be called affirmation and interaction.

Tourists engage in a process of affirmation when they visit a site commonly regarded to be of cultural importance. Mass tourism, like political rallies and protest marches, makes visible to the rest of society a principle or quality considered by the participants to be important. This is why we should not denigrate tourists' cursory parade around a site. The parade—the manifest affirmation in this case of the site's cultural importance—is characteristic of post-modern mass culture. This kind of tourism can be undertaken with a minimum of technocratic intervention. All that is needed is a guarantee that what is visited is authentic: that the site in question is a cultural object accepted as being of importance in itself or because it refers to events or situations regarded by the community to be of relevance to current culture.

MacCannel's view of tourism involves a process which could be called interaction: it is one in which the tourist brings to the site concepts of post modernity and tests them against what is presented. The object or site itself acts as a focus of attention. By directing attention to the object, and discerning difference, the tourist may gain insight into her or his own condition. In this situation great sensitivity is required of the professional in order that the important experience is not intruded on unwarrantedly. Of course, some intervention is inevitable. Professionals in this area are involved in a process of recognizing, describing, surveying and re-informing cultural trends. They are thus both facilitators and instruments of cultural change.

Professor Moulin's keynote address exhibited a sensitive appreciation of this function of tourism and a clear understanding of how it can become undermined by exploitation; hence the great social, moral and cultural responsibilities of those who engage directly or indirectly in the field. She also pointed out that those to whom the tourists' gaze is directed, gaze back, so that they too are caught up in a process of change—not always one for the better. The paper posed philosophical and ethical questions with which those involved in cultural tourism must engage.

As the subsequent papers of the conferences are presented here, there is no need for me to mention each individually. However, I should like to briefly return to the questions that were raised at the beginning of this paper about the relationships between the post-modern world and cultural tourism. Like much else, cultural heritage stands in great danger of being subsumed as a commodity or to being presented only as entertainment so that its larger function becomes subverted. Several speakers were clearly aware of this danger and of the consequent need for professionals to be committed to sustaining cultural heritage and its higher purpose.

Finally, I would like to say that I personally enjoyed the conference not only for the serious issues it tackled in relation to tourism and cultural heritage but also because it also exhibited the cultural concerns of the intellectual world of the present. Papers showed appreciation of its characteristic interest in the past, of the political sensitivity of difference, of interest in reception studies, of inclusion of
meaning into the process of appreciation of objects and sites, of the notion of subjective appreciation of reality—or rather of realities—and so on. In today’s world tourism is deeply implicated in cultural change and therefore current intellectual and cultural concerns need to be understood by those engaged in the field. Happily, the papers presented at this conference demonstrated this kind of understanding and hence made a significant contribution to both the theory and the practice of tourism relating to cultural heritage.