

THE RISE OF THE HERITAGE PRIESTHOOD OR THE DECLINE OF COMMUNITY BASED HERITAGE

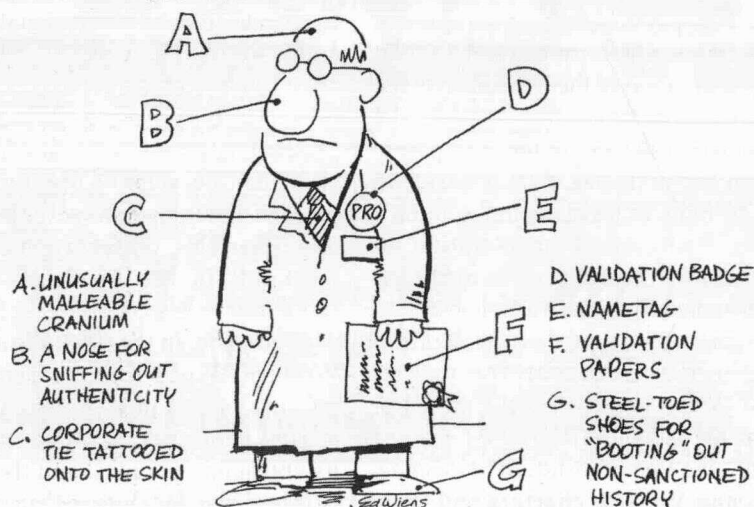
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In October 1996 the United States Department of the Interior sent a cover letter for a lengthy document to state historic preservation officers and copied "tribes, professional organizations, and other interested parties." It symbolized to me the history of the preservation movement in the last 30 years. It is only an accident that this document prodded me to question the growing authority of the heritage professional in North America. Unchecked it might soon infect the rest of the world. The document's title seemed innocent enough—"The Secretary of the Interior's Historic Preservation Professional Qualification Standards." The introduction was less so. Although it concedes that the protection and preservation of "America's important historic and cultural" properties depend on citizen participation, it states without apology that "certain decisions must be made by individuals who meet nationally accepted professional standards."¹ It does not leave citizens the option to decide whether or not to obtain "professional input." Is the priesthood of professionals now to be formally placed between the people and their past? Professionals no longer advise or counsel—they decide. Important cultural decisions can now be only made by professionals. The document then goes on to establish the criteria and bureaucratic processes for the "consecration" of the 11 chosen professions.

This can be interpreted as yet another step in the continuing alienation of the people from their heritage,

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THE HERITAGE PROFESSIONAL.



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a process that started with the destruction and attempted resurrection of Europe's monuments in the period following the Second World War.² I must emphasize that I realize that there is of course continuing citizen input, indeed the citizens will hire professionals, and will use them to achieve their objectives. Nevertheless the consequences are real, subtle and insidious.

Because what happens in the United States has had, and continues to have, an impact on the rest of the world, the implications of this announcement on the world heritage community are worthy of reflection. In the last 30 to 40 years, issues relating to the historical significance of a community's culture have been increasingly filtered by professionals and professional bureaucracies. In the process, a community has been alienated more and more from the decisions relating to the preservation and advancement of its culture. Professional validation (usually from outside) has become required to secure recognition and preservation of a community's heritage.³

The implications are serious. First, since professionals require a university education, and universities tend to hold and perpetuate the beliefs of the dominant class, heritage significance must now be validated by that class. Those who have cultural values that are not those of the dominant class, or whose values are based on informally acquired knowledge, will need to hire degree-holders to validate their knowledge. This will tend to reinforce Euro-American cultural systems of validation and significance.

Second, the emphasis on the importance of professionals in determining heritage significance, and the fact that heritage plans will require professional input, means that heritage, like justice, is now a commodity that can be bought and sold, rather than a precious trust. One of the more obvious consequences of the commodification of heritage is that the advice of professionals will become subject to law and litigation. The courts of the dominant social group, rather than the community that holds the culture, will perhaps one day become the

final arbiter of heritage in the United States, and if we all follow suit, it will soon be so in much of the rest of the world.⁴

A third consequence will be a continuing emphasis on physical rather than spiritual remains. While folklorists can and do assist in the preservation of the intangible, in the end bureaucracies and their servants, the professionals, will tend for the most part to focus on the material. This is easier to justify, to fund, to legislate and is, in fact, in their tradition of preservation of monuments. Spiritual intangibles can be left for philosophers and the Australians.⁵

This process of professionalization started in the 1960s with the various UNESCO and International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) inspired charters—the Venice, Amsterdam, Vienna, Rome, and Warsaw charters and their national offspring, for example Canada's Appelon Charter, Australia's Burra Charter, and New Zealand's Aotearoa Charter.⁶ The 16 articles of the 1964 Venice Charter in particular are today regarded as the conservationists' "commandments" since they above all indicated the importance of professionals in both determining and in preserving the cultural and natural environment. It should be noted that all of these charters are Euro-American in origin and focus on the "great" monuments of "great" civilizations evaluated by Euro-American scholars or scholars trained in European or American material culture traditions. It is equally important, however, to note that these charters do not require their signatories to legalize heritage professional occupations. Rather, they are so arcane in their drafting, and so directive in how nations should deal with communities, that it is assumed that professionals will be in control of determining heritage significance and appropriate physical intervention.⁷

I believe this process, which started with the charters and ultimately the UNESCO

World Heritage Site program, did not initially intend to alienate people from their culture. Great buildings symbolizing high culture had been for the most part created for the wealthy by professionals, artisans, and laborers. These were symbols of the "best" that a culture could produce. Their preservation by state or independent professionals in the post-war period was no more than an extension of existing cultural practice. If heritage was never to mean any more than this, preservation could have been left in the hands of the great restoration architects. However this was not allowed to be. In the 1960s throughout the Western World there was a real and growing interest in preserving the as built and folk heritage of society's disadvantaged, its aboriginal peoples, and its voiceless. Nowhere was this more so than in the white British Commonwealth which had few great national monuments, heterogeneous populations, and significant indigenous populations who retained strong cultural traditions.⁸

If Canada, Australia, or New Zealand were to copy the new Department of the Interior initiative for mandatory professionalization, which they may well do since so much of their heritage practice is based on American precedent, the consequences to their commitment to a community based preservation model could be serious. A generation's worth of populist public history, careful nurture of community input, and community rootedness may well be destroyed. The fragile success of the many communities that make up the very heterogeneous population of Canada could easily be lost.

Australians, Canadians, and New Zealanders with their general claim to be a more heterogeneous national culture have been aware of the consequences of the Americanization of the heritage movement. They have suggested that professionals ought to assist, but have refused to make the



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At Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump World Heritage Site in southern Alberta, the experts worked with the community to determine the appropriate interpretation of the site.

intercessions of professionals mandatory, particularly in the determination of historical significance. Indeed Canada has resisted a policy or legislatively driven intercession of professionals and has maintained a strong community base. Heritage values are based on directions set by communities and by their daily involvement. Admittedly this is not consistent, and exceptions can be found, but there is enough consciousness that historical significance is felt to be a decision that is best left to the communities, not to bureaucratic professionals employed or regulated by a more single-minded nation state. Professionals assist, professionals advise, professionals do not direct.

In the new proposals directing the use of professionals, people who live their culture would no longer be qualified to interpret that culture, unless they have professional qualifications bestowed by "mainstream" society. The result is that marginal groups and cultures must be validated as such by professionals. The following example indicates the consequences of such an

approach were it to have been imposed by a Canadian government. It would result in nothing less than cultural disaster. At Head Smashed In Buffalo Jump World Heritage Site in southern Alberta, for example, the Provincial Historic Sites Service worked with the community to determine the messages that they, the community, wanted at the site. If the professionals had had absolute control, the messages would have been significantly modified.

For example, the legends surrounding the buffalo were often in conflict with what professional archeologists determined science demanded. The legends were also at variance with the research of folklorists who found that oral traditions had changed drastically from the 1890s when they were first collected by German anthropologists to the 1980s when the same legends were again collected. Which legends should be used? The "true" legends of the 1890s or the more recent and more Christianized legends of today. And even if those of 1980 were selected for interpretation, in a living culture they would change again tomorrow.

The stories also differed depending on who held rights to their telling. Professionals could not have taken a role in deciding which legend was the more significant. Only the Piegan community could determine that. The interpretative planning specialist was the profession most valued by that community. The specialists did not dictate significance or context, rather they advised on an appropriate technology that could allow a culture with a strong oral tradition the flexibility to reflect these dynamics. Options were offered, and the community selected those which were most sensitive to their culture. What this did was place the experts at the service of the community.

It will be argued that archeologists, folklorists, and anthropologists are sensitive to community concerns, after they are trained to be so, but an interesting publication involving both American and Canadian archeologists would suggest otherwise.⁹ In 1991, 27 archeologists gave papers on educational programs and public involvement in archeology on the western plains. It is clear from these that the archeologists wanted the public to receive information and support their quest for further public funding. There was no intention to involve the community fully in setting priorities and in communicating findings. What was very clear was an antipathy to amateurs, as the enemy of "real" truth.

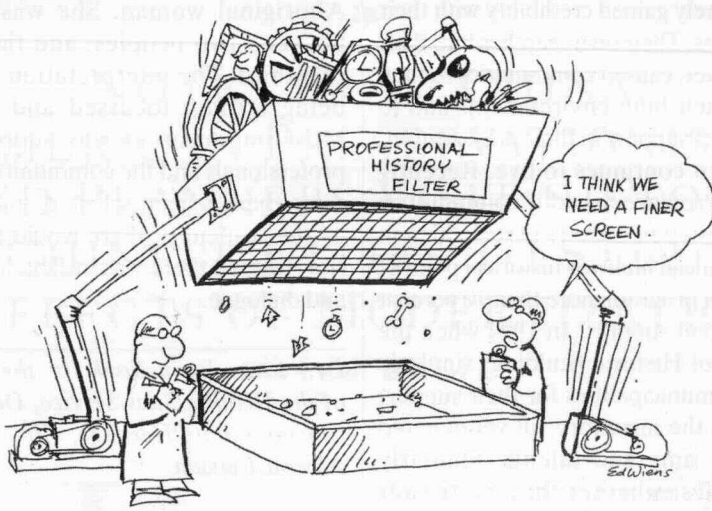
The impact of professionals on communities where they are revered can also be problematic. In a culture that values external validation by professionals, the determination of rankings by outsiders can either reinforce or denigrate the social and economic position of groups within the studied community. In East Central Alberta, for example, the involvement by senior professionals in selecting certain buildings for commemoration has isolated elements of the community whose heritage was not deemed worthy of preservation or

interpretative support. Their experiences were considered of local rather than regional significance. Today, the community itself is starting to rethink the validity of its own cultural hierarchies. The point is that the "professionals" have inadvertently become social engineers. No consideration had been given to the consequences of creating hierarchies of historical significance within communities.

In Alberta we have consciously attempted to avoid the perils of professionalization. Professionals are experts at the beck and call of the community, not misguided social engineers. Historical significance is determined by individuals and their community—not by professional historians or heritage architects, although they do have input.¹⁰

The criteria used for the base selection of cultural and natural resources is very similar to that used by the Department of the Interior, or the United Nations—indeed there is little difference. The difference is in their application. Alberta's heritage legislation vests ownership of all subsurface heritage resources in the Crown. It also gives the Crown the right to unilaterally designate and monitor resources it deems of significance to all Albertans. Where resources are designated by the Province, they can only be altered with permission of the Minister or his or her designate. This would seem to give the professionals a position of influence that only the most naive American heritage professional could dream about.

Prudent consideration acknowledges, however, that legislation can only be applied consistently with public concurrence. Alberta has a master plan for the preservation of its heritage resources which was developed jointly with the communities that comprise Alberta. All suggestions for designations are now made by individuals or communities to the Historic Sites Service, an agency of the



Crown in right of the Province of Alberta. Individuals are encouraged but not required to work with community or staff historians in their submissions. Historians and architects within the service evaluate the submission and negotiate considered changes with the community. Once submissions are complete, the professionals make a formal recommendation to the Assistant Deputy Minister as to whether designation should take place. If the Assistant Deputy Minister rejects the nomination, the individual or the community has the opportunity to plead its case before a citizens' appeals board. It has consistently been the practice of the Province to appoint respected citizens to the appeals board rather than professionals, to avoid domination of heritage by a small group of experts. The board encourages communities to come forward to debate the issues. Because the board is not composed of frighteningly erudite professionals, more often than not a community consensus is found during the board's discussions. The process is informal and supportive, rather than evaluative and judicial.

Similarly the Crown can order historical resource impact assessments by anyone who

might potentially impact subsurface heritage resources. Here and only here, developers must hire licensed archeologists or paleontologists. The Crown also strongly encourages developers to solicit opinions from surrounding communities to determine what they might consider important. The Province reviews the reports generated by the professionals, and can and often does order either avoidance or additional work by the developer. Should the developer ever feel the requirement unjust, he or she can also appeal to the board of citizens. Interestingly, none has ever done so.

The process of citizen involvement began during Canada's 1967 centennial when virtually every community undertook a local history. These local histories spawned an incredible interest in Canada's heritage and cultures. Most were not done by professionals and some still argue that they have absolutely no redeeming value. The process of compilation, however, created in each community a sense of pride and knowledge about its past. Where communities commissioned "professional" historians, and a few did, the connection with community was rarely made. These

volumes rarely gained credibility with their communities. Their own searches into their past, however, caused communities to then consider their built environments and to solicit expert support in their preservation.

The spirit continues to live. Recently when the Province asked if communities were interested in actively participating in a new provincial highway historical point of interest sign program more than 70 percent indicated real support. In 1994 when the Inventory of Historic Buildings similarly canvassed municipalities for their support to upgrade the inventory, all volunteered with their time and talents. Similarly communities, whether they be friends organizations or interest groups, are all invited to be part of exhibitions at museums, working together in selecting themes and determining directions. Consequently the heritage preservation and interpretation system is a continuing process of interactions, with no one person or group having a monopoly on "the truth."

The perils of unfettered professionalism with only nominal community input are obvious. The "Out of the Heart of Africa" exhibit at the Royal Ontario Museum, the "West as America" and "Enola Gay" exhibits at the Smithsonian, profile the worst outcome. In both cases professional curators determined the nature of the messages. The interpretations were hardly radical, although those outside academe obviously thought so. The argument will be made by some that only professional querying will avoid sophomoric pap. However if consultations are open and academics and communities are brought together, even the most radical interpretations can be successful and community driven.

At a fur trade site in Alberta, after a three-day symposium that involved Canada's leading fur trade scholars, representatives from the First Nations, and members of the surrounding communities, it was decided that the site should be interpreted entirely through the eyes of an

Aboriginal woman. She was the link between two peoples, and the creator of a third. The interpretation ended up being strong, focussed and feminist. Most important it was supported by professionals and the community. Had the same themes been selected and imposed by the academics, there would have been riot. Instead there was insight, acceptance and dialogue.

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ENDNOTES

1. De Teel Patterson Tiller, "Secretary of the Interior's Historic Preservation Professional Qualification Standards, October 9, 1996."
<http://www.cr.nps.gov/ppb/qualstand/proqual.htm>
2. The Athens Congress of 1931 reflected the earliest international concerns which were with the classical world.
3. A most curious example is to be found in Butte, Montana. There Carrie Johnson of Arlington, Virginia, was commissioned to undertake a "Regional Historic Preservation Plan—Anaconda—Butte Heritage Corridor" (draft study August 1994).
4. Ian McKay, "History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-64," *Acadiensis* (vol. 22, no. 2, spring 1993), pp. 102-38.
5. Ren Taylor, "Valuing the Ordinary—An Australian Perspective," *Cultural Resource Management* (no. 3, 1996), p. 45. See also Michael Pearson and Sharon Sullivan, *Looking After Heritage Places* (Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 1995), pp. 50-4.
6. Peter C. James, "The Burra Charter at Work in Australia," *Cultural Resource Management* (no. 3, 1996), pp. 49-51. See also H. Stovel, "Introduction to Conservation Charters" in *Preserving Our Heritage Catalogue of Charters and Other Guides* (IUCN/COMOS Canada, June 1990).
7. See the *Catalogue of Charters* for examples which leap out from every page.
8. A thorough study of public history from the bottom up in Canada, the United States and Sweden is Terry MacLean, "The Public Presentation of History and Archaeology in Historic Sites and Outdoor Museums: Case Studies in the Commodification of History." Unpublished paper, University College of Cape Breton, 1996.
9. William Butler, ed., *State Archaeological Education Programs* (n.p. National Park Service, Rocky Mountain Region, 1992).
10. F. Pannekoek, "Alberta: A Community Development Heritage Alternative," *ICOMOS Canada Bulletin Momentum*, 1996, pp. 57-8.