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FIVE QUESTIONS

JAMES CARTER

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James Carter takes a look at five questions he believes to be crucial in linking planning to implementation.

'Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.' Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE FIRST THREE QUESTIONS

Many people have tried to define a model for planning interpretation – I saw a PhD recently that cites at least eight different systems, each with their own more or less intelligible diagram. And yet all of them re-work the same basic questions:

*Why are you doing interpretation?
Who's going to be the audience?
What are the characteristics of what you're interpreting?*

Different models lay emphasis on individual questions, suggest addressing them in a different order or set up different filters through which to look at the questions. To me, the most important thing is that the three questions need to be taken together. It's only by considering the relationship between them that you can reach a meaningful answer to a final question, *What are you going to do?* If you lay too much emphasis on any one of the three basic questions, the result will be skewed, lopsided, a model that doesn't fit the real world.

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MAKING CHOICES

All of the questions present challenges. Graham Barrow, my colleague at the Centre for Environmental Interpretation, used to reckon that the thinking that goes into a plan, the way the process forces everyone involved to define what they're doing and see it more clearly, was more important than the end result. In many ways I'm inclined to agree. The questions, or whatever variation of them you choose to adopt, may lead you to question your organisation's goals, or at least how its goals can have any real meaning in relation to an audience and their experience of a place. The questions will almost always mean you have to make choices, especially about which stories you're going to tell. That means choosing which stories you're not going to tell, and that can be particularly difficult for people whose lives are dedicated to a place or a subject, and who find it hard to accept that not everyone is going to be as fascinated with it as they are.

A MISSING QUESTION

But perhaps the most challenging question is one that isn't in the list: *What happens next?* Some interpretation plans take a strategic focus, setting the context for future projects, but leaving the specifications of exactly what those projects will be, or what content goes into an exhibition, to a future piece of work. Other plans are more detailed, specifying themes, objectives and even what the content should be for each intervention on a given site.



RIGHT: Knockan Crag interprets geology through comic strips.

BELOW:

The Emigration Museum in Bremerhaven, Germany, looks at commonly - held prejudices. Tackling sensitive subjects needs a consistent vision throughout the project.



THE FINAL QUESTION

If a plan involves strategic thinking; defining the purpose of interpretation and the sort of projects an organisation wants to pursue, it can stand alone as a discrete piece of work. If it involves developing a creative approach to a site – all the detailed work of thinking exactly what experience is going to be offered to the audience, and how stories are going to be told – it should be indivisible from its implementation. Perhaps what it all boils down to is a question that needs to be asked before any of the others: *What's this plan going to achieve?*

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That's fine, and if the intention of the plan is to lead directly to implementation, the detailed option makes sense. However, I think there are some important questions to ask about how that implementation is handled.

THE INTERPRETATION MANAGER

At some point in the process of actually doing interpretation rather than planning it, it has to have an author. Most interpretation actually has multiple authors: writers, illustrators, designers, photographers, builders, voice artists, programmers. All their work needs to be coordinated by someone whose job title doesn't appear on any car insurance company's list, and might best be described as *interpretation manager*. His/her role is like that of a director in the theatre: he/she needs a vision of what the project is going to do for its audience, and he/she needs to orchestrate the work of all those concerned to realise that vision.

BREATHING LIFE INTO A PROJECT

But it's often the case that detailed interpretation plans are seen as equivalent to specifications for fencing contracts: once the plan is done, the whole job can be put out to tender to find someone who'll build it. To me, this ignores the most fundamental quality of good interpretation: the author, or the creative director, has to believe in it, to find his/her own 'fit' with the stories being told, to breathe life into the project with his/her personal enthusiasm and creativity. I believe we need to look carefully at how contracts for interpretation planning are set up so that they take account of this.

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ABOVE:

Interpreting geology through comic strips needed clear direction from plan to implementation.