

Food for Thought: Visitor Services as Catalysts for Cultural Engagement

January 23, 2014

Cafe, Cultural Engagement, Events, heritage, History, Restaurant, Visitor services

It's no surprise to any dinner guest to find everyone congregating in the host's kitchen, sipping an aperitif before the dinner is ready. Eastern Canadians will tell you that's where the party starts *and* ends. Some dinner hosts find this pre-dinner period stressful; an attempt to entertain while still working. But would a dinner host prefer their guests arrive an hour before dinner and sit quietly in the living room, hands on their laps ready for the big food show?



Many historic sites and museums offer restaurant or cafe services. But rather than connecting the kitchen to the culture, they just keep the patron from the bigger party.

In most heritage settings we expect visitors to fit a certain mould . We expect them to be enthusiastic about following expert staff on guided tours and we want them to pepper costumed interpreters with questions. We want them to take brochures and maps, interpretive guides and we want them to stay for hours on end. We expect visitors to maintain perfect focus throughout their visit. These are the ideal visitors and we wish there were more of them.

In reality, many visitors don't fit this mould and are rather ambivalent. Although some may appreciate the aesthetic value of historic facades and interesting architecture they may never experience the sites from within.



Food can be historic too.

Is it enough to simply appreciate heritage for its aesthetic? Many heritage advocates don't think so, but who are they to say how people should experience heritage? Instead of discounting ambivalent visitors, perhaps the conversation should be about the kind of experience that is being offered to everyone—not just museum enthusiasts. If engagement is limited to following a velvet rope around a carefully curated display, it's no wonder why many people aren't including heritage sites in their weekend activities—and those working in heritage have to acknowledge this issue.

Some people would argue that offering the public these amplified visitor services degrades what museums and sites *really* do: preservation, conservation, interpretation, and education. Heritage professionals are already fans of history and museums and they unfortunately tend to discount alternative experiences as shallow. The visitor who sips a cup of tea within historic walls might find their experience very meaningful. If heritage sites don't offer people an alternative access point through these services, though, they are missing out on potential audiences and future heritage stewardship.

The ambivalent visitor represents a large percentage of our population and therefore a big piece of the pie. To attract the rest of the proverbial pie heritage needs to provide alternative access points to museums and sites – from gift shops and restaurants to book signings and small lectures, these all offer the public another way to get a foot in the door.

Food is only one method of engaging people in heritage, but it is arguably the most crucial and the one that has the most impact on visitation. Although intended to encourage longer stays and to satisfy basic needs, it can be a major draw for ambivalent visitors.



Cooking in an historic site can present unique challenges-teaching moment perhaps?

Food connects people and it has the capacity to connect people to the past. If made accessible to the public within the site or museum, restaurants can be a catalyst for cultural connection. Some people may not want to attend an hour long tour or the latest exhibit, but almost everyone loves a cup of tea and a slice of pie.



The Restaurant at Lougheed House National Historic Site in Calgary, Alberta.

Some museums use restaurants as tools to inform, engage and promote their latest exhibits through using thematic or ethnic foods to complement exhibits—therefore further extending the educational experience.

The museum I currently work in has an exhibit about ethnic food and the restaurant serves up some of these ethnic dishes to patrons. Despite a lack of educational materials about how the food connects to the exhibit, it does bookend the visit nicely. This is a great way to add an alternative experience to a traditional visit.



I managed a Halloween-themed event at an historic site. It offered a neighbourhood ghost walk and, of course, food. The ghost tour itself was contracted out to a professional, but afterwards people were invited inside the site for candy apples, popcorn, pumpkin tarts and apple cider. These simple treats provided the added value visitors were looking for. The event sold out at \$30 a ticket. In a survey of all guests, 80 per cent of those in attendance had never been to the site before and many returned to take a formal tour or to enjoy the restaurant.

A historically relevant dinner hosted in a museum served as another successful cultural catalyst. The cooking was contracted out to an experienced catering team with a background in this particular fare. They handled the

food and entertainment while my team sold tickets and poured drinks. Of the people attending that night, 40 per cent had never been to the museum and were encouraged by the take-home brochures to come back for another visit. Two people purchased annual memberships. The event was educational, entertaining and delicious.



It may seem silly to consider so seriously these secondary site operations like restaurants or gift shops, but the impact of restaurant's is clear—visitor services matter.

Alternative heritage experiences offer close encounters with history. These experiences allow people to reach across the velvet rope and exist in the same place as our ancestors. They are able to walk the same halls as

those who came before all while savouring a piece of cake.

To stay relevant and engaging, the heritage community needs to redefine its visitor model and encourage alternative methods to both access and appreciate heritage. In failing to do this they risk becoming the antiques they work so hard to preserve. If they want a bigger slice of the pie, heritage sites should entice audiences with it.

-Michaëlle Haughian

http://pastperfect.ca/?p=480&goback=%2Egde_2965314_member_5832571098276835330