



# EXPERIENTIAL INTERPRETATION



“a new structure for an old pursuit”

For a world in dire ecological straits, the increasingly vital field of natural and cultural interpretation has become bogged down in a declarative mode, albeit one tempered somewhat by the current take on constructivist ideology about learning. As a result, interpretation remains focused primarily on presenting and displaying the objects of our world. Given its historical antecedents, this state of affairs, although lamentable, is not difficult to understand.

Five centuries ago, as Europeans began exploring the other parts of the planet they shared, they brought back lots of things to show their neighbors: intriguing pieces of plants and animals, artifacts and art. Such collections would become the forerunners of our museums, arboretums, and zoos, and interpretation began as a way of presenting such objects to a larger public audience.

In the beginning, people collected, categorized and displayed the trophies of their travels in their own homes. In Britain, the receptacles for these bits became known as Curiosity Cabinets, and inevitably they became larger and larger. In London's Kensington Palace there's a huge cabinet that dominates an entire room. In Germany (and elsewhere in Europe), the objects were often kept in their own rooms, *wunderkammers*. Their owners would regale people with explanations of the objects, embellished no doubt with stories about how and where they acquired them. However, they could only spend so much time showing their collection to family and friends. Eventually, either they reached everyone in their social circle, or those people ran out of patience for listening to their stories, or their collection simply became too large to make such a personal approach practical. As a result, the owners began looking for new audiences and methods. Collection places and interpretive guides were born out of such desires (or necessities).



When the Americans began exploring their own arc of the world a bit later, the land itself became the display, but it was “interpreted” using the same tools and techniques of the traditional declarative mode of interpretation, plus a little Socratic dialogue thrown in. Only now the guide could take people to the objects in natural areas instead of bringing the objects to them. Interpreters showed people things in situ but strived to engage them with questions: “Why do you think this is here?”

Many interpreters became caught up in this “show and tell” approach. They identified the pieces and categorized them for their listeners and viewers. They guided people to the most appealing features just as those who came before them guided people through various collections and eventually the structures that warehoused them. They told stories, pointed out the novel, and provided names for the objects.

Over time, these pioneer guides found their audiences were changing. More and more people were looking for leisure “experiences,” and there were just too many collections in too many structures, and too many landscapes in too many places. People wanted something more than the “show and tell” declarative. They wanted to experience things for themselves, preferably in authentic rather than artificial ways.

In order to meet this need, many collection places turned to some form of visitor participation as a means, but it often became their ends. The idea of “meaningful” doing evolved into participation as an end in itself. As long as people were “doing” something beyond observing, it was considered successful. At the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, school groups looked for fossils in the marble floor. Clearly, the staff recognized the importance of providing youngsters with something to “do,” but the challenge is to design “doing” that effectively serves the mission of the place. In this case, the doing seemed to have become the end instead of the means.



**Participation without some meaningful connection to the collection becomes socialization, not interpretation.**

Today, any participation may be seen as good, regardless of how tenuous its relationship to a mission. There are entire books on achieving participation in our collection places, but the purpose of many of their examples is not to interpret the collection but to use it as a platform for social interaction. Sometimes they even say that participation trumps purpose. Such collection places become social hubs and their objects become tools for facilitating social activity. Of course, if the mission of a place is to provide visitors with a platform for interacting with others, any participation will be seen as good, but if the mission is to share the objects of our world as illustrations for how it functions, then getting the visitors to interact with each other may not be the priority.

We have to give such collection places credit for trying. They knew they had a problem. There is just too much stuff to look at, too many placards to read, too many names and dates and technical terms to absorb. Just think of the thousands of objects that have been grouped together in broad categories or themes and placed out of reach for the visitors in countless cabinets, cases, and cages. Attempting to give people something to do, the staff sets up touch tables or carts, interactive computer stations, drawers or flaps to open, etc., but it still remains largely identification and display oriented. Visitors go for stimulation and inspiration, but come away with very little that is relative to their lives. It's a great loss. Most large collection places do an adequate job of offering a venue for relaxation and socialization, but fall short in offering perceptual tools of some practical value for their visitors. Without providing those tools such sites are left to compete with shopping malls, coffee corners, and theme parks.

Let's face it: in these financially stressed times for our public places, the mission for many of them appears to have become survival by any means. Collection places become multiple venue places, or a new kind of community center. Museums install "interactive" devices that provide little or no significant contribution to an overall outcome. Parks add more recreational facilities and less educational opportunities. Zoos create elaborate stage sets where the animals serve as background scenery for eating and drinking, shopping and playing in a natural and cultural representation of the animals' homeland. Instead of serving as illustrations of the natural and cultural processes that shape our world (and us), the objects become tools for more socialization.



### *Objects fade in memory; processes endure.*

At about the same time that participation as the outcome was becoming prevalent, there was a renewed interest in how people learn, but once again, the means became the ends. The emphasis was not on what people were learning, but how they were supposedly learning it. Essentially, the idea was that people construct their own reality, and interpreters just needed to help them "think thoughts" that hovered around what was intended. This alleviated the interpreter from achieving specific outcomes, and themes fit the bill perfectly. A theme often has no particular outcome; it is just a broad organizing tool... the theme of my party, the theme of my symphony, the theme of my novel, the theme of my talk (or walk or exhibit). This was a liberating development for the hobbyists, but a confining one for the profession. Since the only outcome was to get people thinking about something, it absolved the interpreter of any personal accountability.

Here's a revealing test: When asking interpreters what visitors should think after one of their presentations, do they refer to the natural and cultural processes that created the place and its products, or refer to what the visitors think about their program? Does the interpreter want them

to think about the place and its mission, and how to find and experience concrete examples of the world's creative processes during their visit, or just to think about what interests them?

Fortunately, it wasn't long before those who were serious about interpretation realized themes were way too general, too amorphous for the kind of presentations they had in mind, but instead of rethinking their methodology, they tried to shore it up by claiming that a theme had to be expressed in a single sentence, preferably an active one. That's where the field remains today. It's called Thematic Interpretation. Regrettably, it is just the latest spin on the declarative mode.

This is not meant to disparage the efforts of those promoting this method. They were professors of communication and natural resources. They were trying to undergird a profession that had no professional language. The problem is they ended up in a declarative *cul-de-sac*.

How did such an important field of endeavor come to adopt for its structure the methodology of presentations? In America, it appears the National Association for Interpretation, attempting to establish itself as an accrediting body, needed a common language. It turned to the idea of thematic interpretation. A method of presenting became by default the language of the profession. This was a very narrow view of the role of the interpreter and it largely went unchallenged.

According to the National Association for Interpretation, “**Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings in the resource.**”

This definition reveals several layers of the field's current methodological problem:

- + **Communication** implies one-way delivery  
(as in “I delivered the opportunity”)
- + **Connection** implies simple contact  
(rather than deeper relationships)
- + **Interests** implies personal intentions  
(whatever engages one's attention or concern)
- + **Audience** implies passive recipients  
(looking and listening rather than interacting)
- + **Resource** implies utilitarian purpose  
(as if the world exists for the visitors' use)

Of course, these are generalizations and productive interpreters go beyond them, but the overall effect positions the interpreter as a sort of reference librarian for a place. The focus is on delivering something about a place that meets the visitor's interests. It is not focusing on what they will do there other than listening to the interpreter. Granted, there is a lot of emphasis in the field's current methodology about achieving a dialogue with the visitors instead of a monologue, but let's

be honest, that misses the majority of people. Most visitors never even see an interpreter, let alone engage with one in a dialogue. This approach very quickly becomes a personal indulgence that more and more public places can ill afford. Besides, the task is not to connect the visitors' interests with the place, but to enrich the visitors' experience with it in service of its mission. The focus should be on engaging the visitors both "sensorially" and intellectually.

Here's a new definition from **Interpretive Design...and the Dance of Experience**: *"Interpretation is the craft of enriching the experience of leisure visitors with places established for the public good."* In this context, experiential interpretation emphasizes the visitors' overall journey from arrival to departure; what they do during that time to understand and appreciate the mission of the place; and the perceptual tools they will take away with them to apply in other places.



### Interpretation begins in the car park.

Experiential Interpretation goes beyond the declarative. It assists visitors in what they can "do" to have a better understanding and deeper feeling for what created the products they view in our public places. The emphasis is not on what they are told, but what they can do with what they are told.

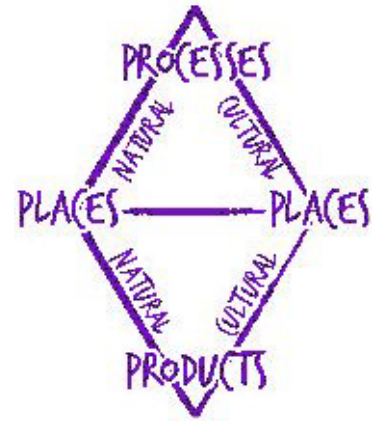
For example, when visitors understand that a universal cultural process is the human desire to decorate, adorn, and embellish (perhaps by asking them to examine and share their own "costumes" at the time), that becomes a perceptual tool for them as they experience other places and people. Life becomes richer, and differences less uncomfortable, when people grasp the processes behind what they experience.

In experiential interpretation the interpreter is more of a coach than an instructor or tutor. And the interpreter is a story-maker rather than a story-teller, because the interpreter assists the visitors in creating their own narrative arc as they experience the place. Experiential interpreters begin their planning by asking: "What is the essence of this public place that we want the visitors to experience and take home and apply elsewhere in their lives?"

## INTERPRETIVE DIMENSIONS

Viewed from an interpretive perspective, everything one senses is an illustration of the planet's processes of life. Interpreters help people focus on those underlying processes, not their products. Their products are the interpreter's illustrations. The interpreter coaches the visitors in

how best to experience those processes for themselves, or reinforce such processes in their own experiences. In short, the job is to identify the processes, not the pieces. For once people understand and feel the processes, the whole world comes alive for them in a new way. Think of it as sharing the “interpretive dimension” where visitors can grasp what’s behind, beneath, and beyond what they are taking in with their senses.



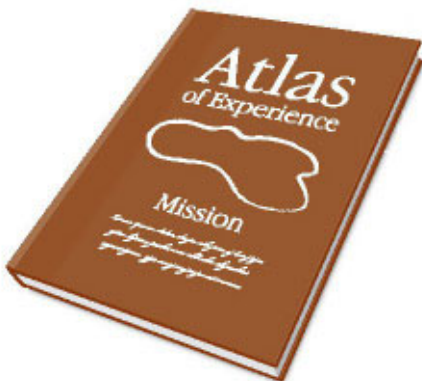
(Interpretive Design and the Dance of Experience)

**Interpretation reveals what most visitors don't see.**

A process is a series of actions that create a result. Properly interpreted the products of life illustrate the unseen processes that created them. The interpreter’s task is to illuminate those processes, give the visitors something to “do” to make them more concrete, and then practice what they can do in other places to apply their new understandings. The declarative mode is about presenting; the experiential mode is about doing.

The essential question interpreters everywhere must ask is how can visitors experience firsthand those processes that create and shape their world, and thus see that world in new dimensions? As a field, interpretation became stuck in the declarative; it needs to refocus on the experiential. If interpreters do not move beyond the declarative mode, they will be replaced by exhibits and robots and greeters. This is already happening, and yet the interpretive profession remains mired in the declarative.

Interpreters should start with the primary processes that acted upon a place and created what can be encountered there. For example, in Florida, the natural processes of sedimentary deposition, geological uplifting and erosion, seashore formation, and seasonal flooding and fire created the Everglades. That is where an interpretive plan should begin, not on the pieces of life on view (alligators, wading birds, mangrove trees, etc.), but the processes that created this place for them. The interpretive task would be the same with any collection of pieces now removed from their place (museums, zoos, aquariums, aboretums). Without focusing on the pieces as illustrations of what happened in a particular place and time, the collection’s objects become tokens out of time and thus lack significant meaning in this time.



(Interpretive Design and the Dance of Experience)

**Interpretation is place-based; education is not.**

The director of the British Museum wrote **A History of the World in 100 Objects**. Just think what he could have contributed with a book on history in one hundred processes.

The major problem with much interpretation today is not a lack of technique, but of structure. Interpreters pick up ideas everywhere, but without a carefully designed structure, they end up with little more than experiential baubles. For the visitors the result is like trying to put together a bunch of puzzle pieces without any idea of what the overall picture is supposed to look like. Without developing a working “Atlas of Experience” for their place, the staff and administrators simply churn out more and more puzzle pieces. For an interpretive designer it is revealing to visit a public site and see such pieces here and there that were left behind when a staff member moved on or the latest buzz in the field faded away. (*For a detailed outline of an Atlas of Experience, see Interpretive Design... and the Dance of Experience.*)

It is easy for interpreters that are asked to perform in a site without an overall interpretive structure to get stuck on the pieces or products of life – naming them, pointing out some of their characteristics or behaviors, explaining their human uses and purposes, telling a story about them – and miss the underlying processes that give them context in this world and prepare visitors for the world that is coming. When one understands and feels the processes operating in a place, its products join the visitors in a meaningful and memorable dance of experience.

**Energy is a theme; energy flow is a process.**

In Italy, rice farmers tapped into the flow of the Po River to irrigate their fields, and then directed all of those little irrigating streams into a smaller and smaller channel to power a turbine with the energy of the now rushing water. The adjoining mill housed a hundred wooden machines all powered by the capture of that energy, but the interpretation focused on those machines without revealing the natural process of the energy contained in the planet’s water cycle that powered them. If they had started with the process instead of the products (the machines), it would have introduced a much more useful (and fundamental) perceptual tool for the visitors. And if they had given those visitors a chance to engage with that process by directing small streams of flowing water to power a miniature turbine on a large model, it would have provided a more meaningful and memorable experience.

Human beings may be the planet’s ultimate joy in knowing itself, but that joy is not founded upon enumeration and classification, but a deeper sensibility and sentience. That is the interpretive dimension... interpreters reveal it and engage visitors with it. In this way, interpretation provides perceptual tools for the visitors to use in their own lives. Using them, they can experience the world more richly.

**When an interpreter begins focusing on the processes of life, not its pieces, the opportunities for experiential interpretation are everywhere.**

Sometimes the experience is already there, but there is no interpretation for what it actually represents. The son of one of the directors of The Institute for Earth Education is a well-known figure in the world of river kayaking. As experiential interpreters, we recommended that he begin every adventure on a rushing river by reminding his fellow participants that they were actually going to “ride the water cycle,” one of the largest physical processes on the planet.

The most rewarding challenge of being an interpreter is to introduce the fundamental processes that created the planet’s pieces and places and devise ways of experiencing them firsthand. Interpreters translate the language of the scientists, exhibitors, historians, and other professionals into personal experiences for the visitors; experiences that capture the essence of its pieces and places.

### INTERPRETIVE MODES

<u>Declarative</u>	<u>Experiential</u>
Show	Share
Display	Illustrate
Present	Coach
Pieces	Processes
Passive	Active
Observe	Engage
Generality	Essence

**A successful interpreter hooks the visitors’ interest rather than caters to it.**

Unfortunately, stories, like themes, have also become a problem in much contemporary interpretation. Stories should illustrate and amplify the universal processes acting upon a place. If they do not, they may end up becoming little more than a momentary diversion. And it is unlikely that our societies can continue supporting such an outcome financially. In the future, if people want such entertainment, they will have to pay for it, just as they pay for other forms of entertainment on their leisure journeys.

Within the interpretive dimension, irrelevant or superficial stories are those that do not reveal the underlying natural and cultural processes acting upon a place; such stories become the end instead of the means. In the hands of an experiential interpreter, timeless stories highlight timeless processes and relate them to the visitors’ current and future experiences.

### CONSTRUCTIVIST ESCAPISM

The idea that people create their own meaning has become an escape hatch for much contemporary interpretation for it alleviates the interpreter of the responsibility for achieving particular outcomes. For many years interpreters have been encouraged to opt for dialogue with the visitors rather than monologue, but today neither is adequate for assisting visitors in “doing” something more in their dance of experience with a place. Given the realities involving the numbers of



visitors and the time available, interpretation can seldom be about facilitating a discussion; it must be about sharing some dance steps.

**Experiential interpretation is neither monologue, nor dialogue; it is prologue.**

Experiential interpreters do not begin by asking the visitors if they have any questions; they begin by guiding the visitors into doing something that may raise questions.

The interpreter's role is to aid visitors in constructing meaning as it relates to the mission of the place and help them experience it more richly. The task is to explain, elucidate, and enlighten in the context of coaching.

The intellectual position that visitors construct their own meaning does not relieve interpreters of the need to instruct them in theirs. That's why they are there: to convey the meaning of the place as determined by those who study it, and reinforce that meaning in giving the visitors something to do with it.

As we have noted, meaningful interpretation is not what happens to people but what they do with what happens to them. In that sense, much interpretation today is little more than pastime, because there are no perceptual tools introduced and no practice in using them. It is light entertainment of the show and tell variety, and interpretive sites are becoming more and more like theme parks as they compete for the visitors' leisure dollars.

**Meaning means what is meant.**

Interpreters help people develop meaning based on the best understandings available. Their purpose is not to give visitors a platform for presenting and amplifying their own conclusions, or an opportunity for reinforcing their misconceptions, prejudices, and personal theories, but to share the best conclusions of those who have analyzed the place and/or its products. Interpreters can, and should, mention plausible alternatives, but they must emphasize the best evidence available as far as it is known.

“Constructivist” interpreters have come up with a lot of ways of escaping responsibility for this work. For example, referring to an activity as an “experience opportunity” becomes a subtle device for relieving interpreters of any rigor in achieving outcomes. They just provide “opportunities” for the visitors, and it is not their fault if the visitors don't take advantage of them, which is yet another way of avoiding accountability.

There's an old saying, “When you teach someone something, you risk robbing them of the joy of learning it.” But isn't that a risk worth taking? Imagine a parent saying to a teenager who had

never driven: “Here’s the key to our car. I don’t want to rob you of the joy of learning, so go ahead and take it for a spin around town.” Although we are not fond of the word “teach,” which often implies acting upon the visitors instead of with them, there are times when instruction is not only helpful but required to facilitate and enhance experience.

## TOOLS, NOT THEMES

*The emphasis in thematic interpretation is on how visitors take something in; the emphasis in experiential interpretation is on what they do with it.*

It should be clear by now that themes are a pervasive problem in interpretation. In common usage a theme is a generalization (friendship, autumn, water) that is developed through a presentation. It is employed to provide focus and organization for a narrative arc (a novel, symphony, exhibit), or the assembling of various elements (a conference, magazine, party), and therein lies the major problem in interpretation. A theme is often too broad for the time available, or too narrow to catalyze the whole.

When an interpreter treats something as a theme, people are unlikely to see it as a tool because there is little use for it in their daily life. How do they fit a theme into their mental web of understandings? Themes are passive categories; processes are active tools.

Perceptual tools provide access to often unseen dimensions of our world. Helping visitors recognize a tree as a woody column supporting an array of sunlight catchers and air transformers becomes a perceptual tool for them in seeing a forest in a more meaningful way, and “re-cognizing” that forest as an apartment building with various levels and residents provides a perceptual tool for them in experiencing it more richly.

An interpreter should not start with a generalization and try to give it some legs or use it to pull together some related elements. An interpreter should start with the distinctive processes that acted upon a place and created its products, and then come up with ways the visitors can experience such distinction firsthand in service of the site’s mission.

A theme is a technique of the declarative mode. It is an attempt to package the illustrations available, but it is starting at the wrong point for most interpretation. Interpreters should not focus on the package, or the particular products it contains, but the natural and cultural processes that created it. When they leave, the visitors should be able to apply their understanding of those processes in experiencing the contents of other packages and thus make the interpretation at this site worth their time.

## Fully grasped primary processes become perceptual tools.

Many visitor centers and collection places have become a jumble of themes which people wander through as if they were in a shopping mall looking for something meaningful and memorable.

This may represent a pleasant dance of discovery for them on a leisure journey, but most take away little of lasting value. Instead of giving them perceptual tools to use elsewhere, they are provided with momentary titillation, shallow participation, and irrelevant interaction.



Remember, when undertaking interpretive planning by asking, “What are the natural and cultural processes that created this place and gave birth to the products available here to illustrate them?”, the result for the visitors will reveal additional dimensions for them. Without those processes the interpretation becomes superficial and transitory, not a lasting contribution to one’s grasp of the world.

Is there room in experiential interpretation for presentations, demonstrations, and similar attractions? Of course there is, but where do those fit in the overall interpretive plan for a place? How do they contribute to its mission? What can the visitors do with what they take away (both in the place and when they leave)? These are the questions that must be answered effectively if such activities are to be part of a serious interpretive effort.

## Experiential interpretation is experiencing meaning in memorable ways.

In the US, Colonial Williamsburg, with one of the largest interpretive staffs in the world, put on an elaborate, carefully choreographed show set in the 1770s about the looming American Revolution. But even though it took place in front of the historic buildings that were there in the period leading up to the conflict, it is unclear what the visitors were supposed to take away. The experience cried out for a more defined purpose. It hung in the air of this colonial capitol as something portentous, and then quickly faded away because the visitors had nothing to do with it. They were entertained perhaps, but not challenged to confront their own thinking.

- ❖ Would they have revolted against established authority during that time and staked everything to create today’s America?
- ❖ Did people in this place 250 years ago merely set the stage for replacing one plutocracy with another (the planter class for the corporate class)?

- ✧ Are liberty and equality antithetical ideals or mutually sustaining ones? (Few places are better positioned to raise this issue, for 300,000 enslaved humans supported this oldest, largest, richest colony in America and Williamsburg was its capitol.)

## REVISITING TILDEN

Since much interpretation today is based on Freeman Tilden's work, **Interpreting Our Heritage**, we should take a closer look at it. Even before presenting his six principles of interpretation Tilden introduced two "concepts" that are at the heart of experiential interpretation:

1) Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact, and 2) Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.

Experiential interpretation is based on revealing the natural and cultural processes of life that lie behind statements of fact, and guiding visitors in **experiencing** those processes firsthand in order to **enrich** their visit to a place. We think Tilden would have approved.

Unfortunately, the interpretive field appears to have veered away from Freeman's principles to emphasize a declarative mode of the interpretive dimension. To some extent this is understandable because Tilden approached interpretation in the context of an audience. He was a reporter and a playwright. Naturally, he viewed interpretation at the declarative level, even when enhanced by more opportunity for firsthand experience. **It's the depth and nature of the experience that is the problem.** Just being in a place is not enough. It may be "sensible," but not "sentientable." In other words, visitors may be able to take it in with their senses, but not "do" much to weave it into their mental web of understandings. It becomes a momentary diversion perhaps in their day but has little lasting effect upon them.

Please note: Tilden didn't write about themes; he wrote about messages. A theme is an attempt to organize. A message is an intended outcome; it's what you want the visitors to take home.

Constructivist interpreters probably avoid messages because they may be held accountable for achieving them. Remember, they just want visitors to think thoughts that hover around the theme of their presentation. In their view, messages are too focused, too prescriptive, and too intrusive.

Tilden was not "wrong" about the structure, but those who followed him got stuck on the presentation or declarative mode of the interpretive dimension. And his principles were such broad generalizations that they lent themselves to this result.

Today, authors of articles on interpretation appear to feel obliged to add some reference to Tilden (one has to wonder if they are advised to do this in order to get published). Of course, it's easy to do. One just has to work in a few key terms (reveal, provoke, or relate are favorites), and like a magical incantation, whatever is being described is considered to be acceptable interpretation. So

here are a few quotes from Tilden's classic work, *Interpreting our Heritage*, that don't get enough use, plus their referential points found in *Interpretive Design and the Dance of Experience*.

~ **Interpretation is the revelation of a larger truth that lies behind any statement of fact.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 8*)

In experiential interpretation the natural and cultural processes of life are these larger truths we want visitors to engage. (*Interpretive Design, page 51-57*)

~ **Interpretation should capitalize mere curiosity for the enrichment of the human mind and spirit.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 8*)

This is the "enriching experience" in the new definition of interpretation offered here. (*Interpretive Design, page 1-4*)

~ **In the museum, the interpreter can seldom come into contact with his visitor. In lieu of that, he must leave a message for him.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 13*)

Note that Tilden doesn't leave the visitor a theme, for it's hard to take home a theme; they don't travel well. (*Interpretive Design, page 113-116*)

~ **The purpose of interpretation is to stimulate the reader or hearer toward a desire to widen his horizon of interests and knowledge, and to gain an understanding of the greater truths that lie behind any statement of fact.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 33*)

In short, not catering to personal interests but stimulating the visitors to widen their interests through an enriching experience with a place. (*Interpretive Design, page 33-35*)

~ **It is far better that the visitor to a preserved area... should leave with one or more whole pictures in his mind, than with a mélange of information that leaves him in doubt as to the essence of the place, and even in doubt as to why the area has been preserved at all.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 41*)

The alchemy of interpretation is capturing and sharing essence experientially. (*Interpretive Design, page 85-86*)

~ **If you are to guess what part-man you... are to cater, the case is hopeless. But if you make your target a whole man who seeks new experience, relaxation, adventure, imitation of friends who have told him "you mustn't miss it," curiosity, information, affirmation, and one thousand-odd other motives, you cannot fail to hit. He may be there for the explicit hope that you will reveal to him why he is there.** (*Interpreting Our Heritage, page 45*)

Again, the task is not primarily to cater to old interests, but to create new ones. (*Interpretive Design, page 41-42*)

~ ... I set myself the task of collecting and studying what we may refer to as the “inscription.” This specifically includes relatively brief messages, indoors or without, aiming at something deeper than mere information. (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, page 57)

~ But more important is to have answered for yourself, as interpreter, the vital questions: What is the keynote of this whole place? What is the over-all reason why it should have been preserved?” It is for this reason that I have in time past suggested what I call the ‘master-marker’ which would be, as one might say, the title of the book, and the rest of the markers would be chapter heads. (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, page 60)

These should be the defining messages that express essence, followed by secondary messages that summarize its primary components. (*Interpretive Design*, page 109-110, 113-116)

~ To me, it is elementary that participation... must be physical. ...not only must it imply a physical act, it must also be something that the participant himself would regard as, for him, novel, special and important. (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, page 73)

Interesting, because most of the illustrations in Tilden’s work do not convey such participation, but merely portray “show and tell” situations with most of the participants just watching. (*Interpretive Design*, page 127-129)

~ The visitors who come ... have seldom any expert, or even moderate, knowledge of the things they have come to see or experience. (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, page 91)

So why does current interpretive methodology encourage them to contribute to the interpretation? (*Interpretive Design*, page 33-35)

~ What are the forces that created what one sees, and feels, as beautiful? (*Interpreting Our Heritage*, page 111)

It is fitting that we should both begin and end this visitation with Tilden’s work referencing natural and cultural processes, for processes become forces in time and Tilden recognized their importance. (*Interpretive Design*, page 69-71)

## UNMASKING THE THEMATIC

Interpretive themes often mask the interpretive dimension when the need is to reveal it. The interpretive dimension lies beyond the thematic description. To reach it, one may have to peel away any thematic mask that’s been constructed.

Here are thematic statements developed by three of America’s most captivating national parks:

✿ “The approachable active volcanoes of Hawaii Volcanoes National Park allow first-hand discovery of and connection with one of the most fundamental forces of our world – in both its creative and destructive roles.”

To unmask a theme the interpreter must seek the processes behind it. Interpretive themes like this often end up as descriptive statements rather than defining ones. They do not encapsulate a revelation about a place that will alter perception, but offer passive descriptions of what's there. In this example, what lies behind the descriptive mask is a far more revealing take-away message: *"In some places this planet's molten interior continues erupting to form and shape the crust we all live on, just as it has been doing for millions of years. Volcanoes are the planet's geologic pustules, and they are both destructive and creative."*

✿ *"The convergence of desert, mountain, and river ecosystems in Big Bend National Park supports a remarkable diversity of life and provides abundant opportunities to experience and learn about the natural world."*

Is this something the park wants visitors to take home, that Big Bend provides lots of opportunities? It sounds like something from a tourist brochure. This is the kind of broad descriptive statement that one could develop in any number of directions. That's the problem with many theme statements. They are not outcomes to be realized but merely general topics with no clear connection to a larger picture, which may explain why they are popular: they are open-ended, and their success is difficult to measure. If the presentation for such a theme was mildly entertaining and even slightly interesting, it was considered successful. After all, in many places interpretation is still free for the visitors. Accountability for how it met the mission of the place may not be a determining factor. Thematic interpretation would be satisfied if the visitors departed just "thinking thoughts around the theme." Where else in our societies are we content with paying people to achieve such limited results? The visitors may not understand what happened in this place and why that was important enough to preserve it, but they are thinking thoughts around it. In other words, they don't know why the place exists, but they seemed to have had a good time. They left happy (but keep in mind that most people leave Disney World happy and they pay substantially for it).



✿ *"Diverse, well-exposed, and accessible geologic features enable us to learn about the processes that shaped, and continue to shape, the Earth and influence its inhabitants."*

Well, this theme statement from Isle Royale National Park sounds promising, but notice the caveat: the features "enable us." Why not just say the features illustrate the processes? Many theme statements tend to be written not as what **will** be done, but what **could** be done, thus eliminating any responsibility for what is done.

Sometimes such “themes” get close to providing some achievable outcome, but then they head for the escape hatch. In this example, they “enable” the visitors to learn rather than state what they will learn. With just a little refocusing the interpreter would have more direction: *“Diverse, well-exposed, and accessible geologic features illustrate the processes that shaped, and continue to shape the Earth and its inhabitants. At Isle Royale National Park you will experience the results firsthand.”*

As you can see, these three examples represent descriptive statements that are a kind of passive mask that does not reveal the underlying active processes of life. The interpretive dimension lies behind such descriptions. It’s not the mask that’s important in interpretation but what created the mask. Analyze any interpretive offering and ask, “does it reveal the interplay of the processes of life in this place or focus merely on the products of those processes?”

Never forget, a theme often hides or misrepresents a deeper reality. It’s like going to the theater and focusing on the costumes and scenery and missing the meaning of the play. Today, revealing the interpretive dimension often requires unmasking the thematic.

By their very nature, masks are designed to distort or camouflage reality, and that’s what many themes do in interpretation. They provide a mask that deflects attention from what needs to be revealed. Experiential interpretation emphasizes what the participants will “do” with what they take in. That is, what will they do with their understanding of the processes that created a place and its products, and how will that “doing” serve the mission of the place? In all three of these examples, there are things to do in the parks that would make the underlying processes more concrete for the visitors. Interpreters should share how to experience them. In many cases, that will be what the interpreters do on their own day off.

In the early years we began our interpretive design workshops by asking the participants to choose a public place they knew and loved and create a schedule for what they would do there to share it with a couple of friends. We called the exercise, “A Perfect Day,” and asked the participants to think through and outline the entire adventure. Interestingly, the kind of things they chose to do were often not the experiences on offer for the visitors. Most never even took their friends to the Visitors Center or joined an interpretive walk or talk.


For many of our workshop participants interpretation was about presentation, not facilitation, but when it came to their own friends, they placed their emphasis on what they would “do,” rather than look and listen. Almost everyone included some form of eating and drinking. In Finland, they would stop for something to eat and drink on their way to the place, then eat and drink while there, and stop again to eat and drink on their way back. Of course, we assume they were explaining things as they went through the day at the place, but it was clear they were thinking about “doing” something more. Thematic interpretation was what they presented to the public, while experiential interpretation was what they would do with their friends. The challenge of experien-



tial interpretation is to facilitate the visitors' experiences in meaningful, useful, and memorable ways. The key question experiential interpreters must ask themselves is: how will they coach the visitors in experiencing the place on their own?

## SEVEN STEPS FOR EXPERIENTIAL SUCCESS

There are seven steps in designing effective experiential interpretation. They are sequential and irreplaceable. Skipping ahead or leaving one of them out will produce ineffective experiences. Experiential interpretation is structural and integral to an overall interpretive plan, and it starts with the plan, not the pieces on display.

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1. Review the mission  
(why does this place exist, and what does it aim to do?)
  2. Analyze the processes  
(what created this place and/or its products?)
  3. Determine an outcome  
(what should the visitors take away from this experience?)
  4. Select the illustrations  
(what objects and actions here best make its creative processes concrete?)
  5. Devise the activity  
(what will the visitor “do” here to reinforce the understanding and feeling desired?)
  6. Guide the experience  
(how will a feeling of genuine experiential care be conveyed?)
  7. Evaluate the result  
(how can this experience be polished?)

Want to learn more? See **Interpretive Design... and the Dance of Experience.**

Enough. I hope there's something here for interpreters to think about. What a joy it is to be an interpreter of this world rather than just an inheritor of its past. People come to interpreters willingly during their free time. They are enthusiastic and full of anticipation. The interpreter's task is to welcome them to a public place, explain how it came to be, and enrich their experience with it. Understanding and experiencing firsthand the natural and cultural processes that created a place and the products it contains will enable the visitor to interact with the world in more meaningful and memorable ways. Experiential interpreters are primarily story-makers not story-tellers as they coach people in creating their own story with a place, and web-weavers as they assist people in developing the strands of their mental webs (the understandings) and giving them the glue for holding those strands together (the feelings).

In interpretation what you see is an illustration of what you don't see. Analyzing and synthesizing the natural and cultural processes acting upon and within a place leads to revealing messages that capture its essence and produce perceptual tools for the visitors to use elsewhere. Given the history of "guiding," it is understandable why interpreters today might get stuck on the accoutrements instead of using them to illustrate the processes that produced them, but it is difficult to understand why the profession of interpretation got stuck there as well.



(Interpretive Design and the Dance of Experience)

Interpretation is one of the world's great occupations. It is neither art nor science, but the craft of helping visitors experience both. Whether this craft not only survives but thrives is largely up to the profession, but expanding its vision from a declarative mode to an experiential one will help ensure its future.

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*"experientia docet"*

⊕ *Interpretive Design and the Dance of Experience*

⊕ "Musings on Themes as Design Poison" [www.ieetree.org](http://www.ieetree.org)

⊕ "Sharing the Stories of Cairngorms National Park" [www.ieetree.org](http://www.ieetree.org)