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**CONFERENCE REVIEW**

# CHAT 2013: Experience, University College London, 8–10 November 2013

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For ten years now CHAT (Contemporary and Historical Archaeology in Theory) has set out to challenge assumptions around the archaeology of the recent past with a series of thought provoking thematic conferences. This year, the 11th annual CHAT Conference was held at University College London and jointly organised by the Institute of Archaeology and Atkins,[1] with a broad focus on the topic of 'experience.' Over three days, established academics, early career researchers and practicing heritage professionals from across the world offered up their take on this sometimes nebulous theme. The results were - in turn - captivating, frustrating, enlightening and provocative, but never boring.

Rodney Harrison and Sefryn Penrose began the conference with introductory remarks which emphasised the practical and theoretical impetus behind the chosen theme. Experience may be understood from a wide variety of disciplinary and methodological perspectives, drawing in such notions as 'the experience economy' (Pine and Gilmore 1998), the emotional and affective experience of heritage sites, studies of everyday life, or the phenomenological approach to past landscapes. For archaeologists in particular, a focus on experience opens up questions around 'doing' archaeology, from the embodied process of excavation to apprehending material culture of the recent past through an archaeological lens. Papers over the course of the three days would navigate and test these conceptual and grounded arenas of debate.

Although not described as 'keynote speakers,' Cornelius Holtorf and Paul Graves-Brown presented papers which helped frame subsequent discussions. Holtorf argued persuasively for a recognition that we are now in an era of 'pastness,' when things no longer need to be 'authentic' or even old to matter as heritage. It is perception which matters, not historicity. This he usefully contrasted with Alois Riegl's early twentieth-century description of 'age-value' (1928), an idea which can now be simulated through 'clever copies and imaginative reconstructions.' Graves-Brown also challenged our idea of what archaeologists could or should study with a stimulating paper on advertising, design and material culture, taking in electric kettles, the Model-T Ford, mobile phone cases and Freudian psychoanalysis. In any other archaeological conference this might have seemed out of place, but CHAT allows space for precisely these pioneering or alternative studies.

The remainder of the first day included papers on the practice of contemporary archaeology in Detroit and its value to the future of the city, the experience of absent buildings in two quite disparate locations (Indianapolis and northern Finland), and artistic research into Scotland's nuclear industry. These vibrant presentations sought to confront the experience of traumatic, hid-

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den and neglected pasts in the present, drawing on innovative methodologies to complicate and challenge preconceived notions of banal, evocative or menacing material environments. An evening drinks reception to celebrate the launch of the *Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World* (Harrison, Graves-Brown, Piccini eds. 2013) offered an informal setting to discuss the issues raised at the end of the first sessions.

Day two began with a distinctly Finnish flavour. Three papers from scholars based at the University of Oulu helped demonstrate the international reach of contemporary archaeology, while the diversity of topics proved the breadth of the field. Tiina Äikäs' paper on the archaeology of a 1980s TV set certainly woke attendees up with its gruesome introduction to the show in question, *The Age of Iron*, while 'proper' archaeology was well represented by Titta Kallio-Seppa's investigation into the experience of smell and wetness in a northern Swedish town between the 17th and 19th centuries. Tiina Kuokkanen ended the session with a fascinating look at how archaeology can be used to understand the experience and memory (or lack thereof) of people attending raucous music festivals. This was no doubt a popular project to work on for the young team involved in on-site data collection, and there was a clear emphasis on how archaeology might be made relevant to 'hard to reach' groups through such work.

Daniel Lee and Antonia Thomas brought us back to Britain via the Orkney Islands, where they have been involved with the Papay Gyro Nights contemporary arts festival as 'archaeologists in residence.' Crucially, for Lee and Thomas this means undertaking an archaeology *with* rather than an archaeology *of* the events, places and individuals concerned. As a result, the project has led to new ways of 'doing' archaeology and new ways of thinking about its relevance to the contemporary artistic world. This idea would be picked up later in the day, when Sharon Veale and Carolyn White discussed encounters between art and archaeology in Western Sydney and Berlin respectively. The geographical and conceptual scope of this research points towards a vibrant sub-field.

The art and meaning of commemoration also emerged as an important topic for contemporary archaeology during the second day of the conference. For Greig Parker, presenting research carried out with Clare McVeigh, the experience of being a Gypsy Traveller in late twentieth and early twenty-first Britain might be better understood through an examination of their gravestones, which often reveal a story at odds with commonly held beliefs surrounding this marginal community. Sarah May meanwhile has examined the recent (mis)use of World War I memorials in Portsmouth, asking whether we are losing contact with the kind of memorialisation these objects are supposed to embody. Documenting their role as sites for smoking, skating or rough-sleeping, May's lively talk opened up the historical and contemporary meaning and experience of these visible if often overlooked locales. Again, such research highlights the benefits of interrogating our taken-for-granted material environments through an archaeological lens.

It is important to note however that excavation remains a central tool of investigation, even for contemporary and historical archaeologists. Quentin Lewis' discussion of a fascinating site in north-east England where the Great Depression led to an ideological re-organisation of land use highlighted the need for such in-depth explorations. This would not be without relevance to the current economic circumstances of the region, with Lewis making explicit connections between the experience of the 1930s and today's 'Great Recession.' A more personal view of excavation was presented by Steve Brown, who has dug small trenches in his own back garden in the suburbs of Sydney and systemically catalogued the remarkably diverse resulting finds. This somewhat peculiar talk avoided an issue which the audience were keen to hear more about, namely a drive-by shooting on the former occupants of Brown's home which had left physical marks on the building. A reluctance to engage with

the wider political issues at stake in the investigation of our material surroundings does little to advance the relevance of archaeology to the contemporary world.

Such a criticism could not be levelled at the work of Jonathan Gardner, whose engaging and amusingly illustrated paper tackled the dangerous field of chemical contamination within archaeological excavations. Building on a complex typology of possible contaminants, Gardner drew on personal experience to demonstrate the psychological efficacy of the 'unwanted things' archaeologists encounter in their daily practice. The reflexivity and self-awareness of a talk which deftly combined theoretical perspectives and 'real' archaeology is to be applauded.

Jane Baxter opened the final day of conference proceedings with a paper which referred back directly to Holtorf's idea of pastness. The construction of an artificial archaeological site underneath the Atlantic Resort in the Bahamas illustrated precisely the potential for imagined pasts to gain experiential power and affectivity. This provided an interesting counterweight to the work of Gilly Carr and Mads Daugbjerg, both of whom deal with imaginative investment in 'real' histories (the German occupation of the Channel Islands and the battle of Gettysburg respectively). 'Vicarious re-experiencing,' to use Carr's term, is highlighted by practices such as ghost hunting or re-enactment at these intensely evocative sites. Here, the past and present are drawn together in ways which lie outside mainstream archaeological or heritage practice. The fact that such experiences are often far more emotionally engaging than traditional educational or interpretive strategies is highly telling for heritage professionals.

The final session of the conference brought together scholars from Britain, Finland and Australia to expand on these issues. David Harvey and Nicola Whyte examined the tensions between personal and public memory around Runnymede, while Irmeli Pääkkönen's humorous presentation highlighted the various ways in which the folklore of Kalevala is used to market a largely imaginary past in the present. Peta Longhurst provided a fitting closing paper on Sydney's 'living museums,' sites which complicate ideas around authenticity and the move from passive to active exhibitionary experiences. This led to an engaging question and answer session with lots of 'brain storming,' a defining feature of the weekend as a whole.

An important part of this year's CHAT was the inclusion of films, posters and a photographic exhibition which helped to augment the overarching theme. Short films from Nick Edwards, Gair Dunlop and Toby Pillat and Gemma Thorpe were particularly enjoyable: the experience no-doubt helped by free popcorn and alcohol supplied by Atkins. Both David Kendall and Felipe A. Lanuza's photographic work meanwhile offered an intriguing visual backdrop to the weekend, drawing on many of the themes already discussed, including sensory perception, palimpsest urban landscapes and the complex interplay of presence and absence.

Finally, it is worth noting that the Gustave Tuck lecture theatre - one of the more traditional pedagogic spaces of UCL - provided a suitable setting for the conference; its historicity and 'pastness' combining with the knowledge that Michael Caine and Leonardo DiCaprio had filmed scenes for Christopher Nolan's *Inception* here just a few years previously. The material environment of the location may not have changed as a result of Hollywood interventions in the space, but our perception of the room is liable to shift with this information. From the filming itself to our subsequent use of the site - via engagement with the movie in various forms - a complex layering of experience(s) raises the possibility of the decidedly familiar becoming suddenly exotic.

Next year CHAT will be hosted by The Museum of West Bohemia in Pilsen, Czech Republic. The theme of 'Dark Modernities: Archaeologies of Totalitarianism, Authoritarianism and Repression' should make for an equally fascinating few days, and it is worth noting that some funding will be made avail-

able for students who wish to attend. On the strength of the 11th annual conference, it comes highly recommended.

## Notes

[1] The organising committee consisted of Rodney Harrison (UCL), Sefryn Penrose (Atkins), Gabriel Moshenska (UCL) and Jonathan Gardner (UCL)

## Acknowledgements

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