Working imaginatively to engage Ethnic Minorities
in the Historic Environment
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Working with new audiences is surely not about 'more of the same' to new groups of people –
difference generates new opportunities. We can reach out to ethnic minorities by:
- *extending a welcome and enabling them to access the enjoyment and use of the historic*
  environment
- *nurturing their interest in the historic environment*
- *unlocking their potential contribution to the care of the historic environment*
- *involving them in producing resources relevant to their needs and wishes*
- *uncovering the opportunities for new ways of engaging with the historic environment*
- *tapping into indigenous knowledge and skills*
- *linking social, cultural and environmental aspects of the historic environment*
- *working cross-culturally towards a transformed experience of the historic environment*

All of us, professional or otherwise, are in touch with facts about the historic environment to some extent. But relative to our level of knowledge, and the relevance of the subject to our lives, we proceed to discard, dismiss, embellish and edit. People, as culture-creating beings, constantly create a perceived reality heavily modified by selective caring. In each period, cultural groups create mythical images and enveloping myths which drive the manipulation of interpretation of their surroundings in particular directions. These personal myths powerfully create new realities. Mythical images created as such express the aspirations and the social and the cultural values of our time. Many of them are rooted in emotive psychological needs which necessarily deny aspects of the full picture as it can be known to ourselves. With the world open to mass communications and complex cultural-historical allegiances, coupled with a multi-cultural local scenario, cultural groups within society and within the world now create competing mythologies, vying for expression to shape the reality that each of the culture groups would like to have.

These opening ideas relate to current events, issues and ideas such as September 11, the challenges of our own national identity and of our situation in Europe and the world, and of globalisation generally. Black Environment Network is the primary organisation working for ethnic environmental pacification. Our mission statement says that we work for participation in both the built and the natural environment. When we started in the nature conservation sector 15 years ago, nature reserves were about building fences so that people could not get into them. Now, things have really changed: nature conservation is a huge movement and we have helped the sector to get people really to engage.

Recently, for example, the British Conservation Trust for Volunteers (BCTV) got a grant of £1.3m from the Community Fund to set up an 'Environment For All' project, aimed at opening up their organisation and working within all the strata of society by putting into place local project officers directed at reaching out to both ethic communities and other disadvantaged user groups. We are supporting that project by undertaking a review and bench-marking exercise for them, and that is how our organisation works. Instead of a pressure group coming forward, hitting you on the head and saying you are not doing this so go out and do it, we actually have a very different philosophy that says - ethnic communities need support and nurturing to come into a new area of endeavour but at the same time we also realise that engaging them is a new area of endeavour for the organisations.

So we do a lot of work helping organisations of goodwill to move forward. We work both conceptually on the policy side and on the practical side, assisting people in many areas so they can actually make the changes that we feel are necessary in order to make things happen and make people fully participate. Some of our publications on the table including the latest one, 'Heritage and Greenspaces', bring together recent papers around certain themes.

We work conceptually and try to strike at the heart of the matter, going beyond superficial yes-no things about whether you do or do not reach out to people. We really think through what it is that makes things work when we engage with people. Engagement with people is an area of activity that is quite different from other parts of the work of an organisation built around a concentration on mechanistic expertise about knowing a subject and doing it well. The side that deals with people is what is needed when you work for change in relation to social inclusion.

Change happens only when three things come together," *thinking"* - knowing what it is about," *feeling "* for the subject - which underpins the essential commitment and motivation to reach out and engage with the target group, leading finally the the third component "action". Commitment and action do not come together out of thin air; there needs to be within the organisation a context of raising strategic awareness that allows people to think about these feelings. Allowing people to decide for themselves through thinking and feeling that they want to do something is how the organisation finally becomes committed.

Strategic action is achieved by means of a combination of policy and projects. It is not just about despatching project officers to reach out to the grass roots of a community or organisation; it is also about awareness and commitment at the top. Strategically we need to say to ourselves that, within three years, in certain strata of the organisation, we will have identified the key people for whom the necessary awareness raising exercise has taken place. That is the basis and foundation for driving relevant policy through management to implementation throughout the actual culture of the organisation, with the result that socially and culturally appropriate programmes of activities appear on the ground. That is the most powerful way of doing it.

When we reach out to certain groups, how do people actually feel about what they are, and are not, able to do ? What are the perceived barriers, and what is the basis for them ? One of the most important things to understand is that what we wish to do and what we can achieve depends upon how we see ourselves, and what we would like to become. But all this is against the enormous pressure of how others see us. The individualistic nature of the contemporary world is one of the most powerful factors in the way people form themselves; people construct themselves as much as society tries to construct them. But our possibilities for action are limited by how we as individuals see the world, so we need to understand and realise that organisations are power-houses of knowledge and resources which direct how people look at the world, how they appreciate different roles, shape action and decide whether ot not to engagewith others. At present this kind of understanding can be a powerful force for us, in the sort of world we have now with all its problems.

What is the role of heritage ? You talked a little about theme parks this morning, that many people are going in the entertainment direction, a current trend in society at the moment. Instead of having history we have heritage, which is a more rosily packaged version of how we would like to see our past. There is a real need for our contribution to be focused upon the revelation of history based upon meaning. We can use the analogy of people leaving a theatre weeping their eyes out after seeing a

tragedy, saying they enjoyed it. The difference between going for historical meaning and going for theme-park heritage is that you do not simply entertain; rather you give the audience enjoyment because the meaning of what they experience draws them out and informs their life. That where the power of the historic environment lies in relation to playing a significant role in the context of our complex troubled contemporary world.

Before I talk about multi-culturalism I must ask you to think about yourself as an ethnic group - even though you might be the majority ethnic group; whenever I say 'ethnic group' don't think about 'them', think about 'us'. We are all ethnic groups, and when we put ourselves in that circumstance we also think differently about ourselves. Thinking about multi-culturalism is extremely important at the moment because of the things that are happening in the world; people are using words in all kinds of different ways that drives them to different kinds of behaviour. We need to look at certain words like multi-culturalism in a constructive way in order to help people think through some of the current challenges. This ought to be easy for archaeologists because they deal with things that go way back, and know already that all cultures are multi-cultural. Others have to be convinced or reminded, often to their surprise, that once there was no such people called the English. Archaeologists talk about the importance and power of knowledge, and have the power to talk about multi-culturalism in a way that some other groups do not. This needs to come out more, and be better known as a social force helping people rethink what they mean by multi-culturalism, that it has always been there as a continual historical fact. We may define a contemporary culture as being unique - marvellously complex, extremely interesting in how they are positively and creatively incorporate elements of many cultures. It puts the lie to concepts like cultural swamping because any culture at any one time is a unique combination of multi-cultural characteristics, all with their own histories.

We also need to look beyond the superficial. People talk about the obvious things that symbolise heritage and culture, historic icons, palaces, castles, but the discussion should go much deeper. We should not look at the things of ordinary life as if they have nothing to do with culture and heritage and only then start thinking about it when we go to visit a site. For example, every day we call Arabic numbers Arabic but we never think about them as Arabic; the powerful concept of 'zero', without which there would be no computers, comes from India. These things are not trivial; they matter because they are not about the selfish owning-type 'I'm unique' kind of culture but rather the generous giving and taking and recognition of contributions across nations and cultures across time. At the present moment this so important in the context of discussions raging every day around asylum seekers, constantly damaging hitherto generally positive relationships between cultural groups in this country, by pushing over-simplified ideas at people who have not been able to give the subject real thought, and by dividing people through fear that also destructively prevents people from engaging with the issues.

There is a real task within the heritage sector to realise its huge capability for facilitating the engagement of cultural groups – all cultural groups including ourselves; everyone belongs to a cultural group. It is not just about working with small groups by themselves alone because there are real pieces of important work to be doen around enabling access by many of the disadvantaged groups who simply have not had the privilege of contact with knowledge of the sites where they can enjoy the wonderful things that we can show them. That is one side of it. The other side is the concept of multi-cultural interpretation of the environment, interpretation done in such a way that everyone realises naturally, without an effort, that we are all part of the world, that things which are locally unique also give us continuity with the world. Lets take the example of the oak tree in Britain as a

great symbol for our country. An interpretation board on a nature reserve can so easily have side-by-side pictures or photographs of other oak trees, an American oak, an oak from Morocco from which we get all the wine corks, expressing the idea of the 'family of trees across the world'. The emphasis is not upon culture or difference, but upon the unifying idea that local uniqueness has continuity in the world. If we were only slightly promote more consciousness that everything is like that, we would make an enormous contribution. We can re-position mainstream awareness by recognising the power of making concrete the principle of inter-relatedness in very simple ways.

Two simple matters are intrinsic to all successful engagement. The first is the new enjoyment and improved quality of life for many deprived groups arising from coming into contact with things that are fun and meaningful, and which recognise their presence when they go into a site and see the interpretation, so that they can recognise it and feel that they are a part of it. The second is the importance for the movement as a whole of having more supporters who are ordinary people. Don't just think of ethnic minority groups; think also of all those other disadvantaged groups, like people on council estates, who do not yet have the privilege of knowing what you do. What is needed for any social groups that have not had access to the environment is to help them to access the enjoyment of the environment. Looking further into the future, that enjoyment will unlock their presently missing contribution to the care of the environment. It is simply the following through of basic human processes shared in common by all. We all come to love what we know and enjoy, and we fight for what we love. We need mass support for the historic environment. This can be achieved through developing processes such as promoting access, providing information and building relationships, encouraging and enabling people to wield some power with you, switching on their potential to work for the environment.

This is a remedy not for the kind of deprivation related to how much you earn a week but related to a loss of access to the variety of life. Thinking about how we relate to each other and to various situations brings us to think about working for change and the energy we need for it. Much of it is a matter of making connections, being able to identify with situations through groups. Groups can access wonderful places that have meaning for them and through these experiences, engage with today's problems. Go to Hadrian's Wall, a wall connecting so many peoples; it is all about dominant cultures and subservient cultures and about keeping people out, and about who comes in: is that not what concerns us today also ? Such connections bring things to life, and engage people by bouncing something off the past and helping them think through something that is in the present. It can bring meaning into people's lives in a way that transforms them and puts them in a situation with new choices to engage with the protection and the development of the historical environment. Some of these things - engagement with people, representation and partnership – when listed sound so obvious, but they are the urgent complex things which we need to consider to shape our contribution so that we can successfully address the contemporary problems in our society.

Postscript 1
Who owns heritage ? The only thing left of nationhood is the responsibility for geographical chunks. Beyond that doesn't it belong to everybody ? Are the Italians going to come and get Hadrian's Wall ? The British have formed a relationship with the West Bengali Assembly because they want to do something about Clive's house in India. They think it's English heritage out there.

Postscript 2

How do you start engagement ? You begin at the easiest starting point, look at all the things you have anything to do with and try to find something that is quite exciting and catches the imagination. You promote it to communities and do other things around it. You can do things that are very simple, like looking at all your properties and find all the neutral bits and simply invite groups to come and enjoy themselves. There are two strands here: sometimes you can do meaningful things so that people can see that you recognise their presence in the work that you do, and that really captures them to engage with you; sometimes there is merely the simple truth that many things simply provide a great starting point of enormous enjoyment. Black Environment Network has done many projects in partnership with organisations where we help to form projects, go out to facilitate the connection and identify the easiest route for starting to work within ethic communities. For example we are about to do something with the Historic Houses Association, identifying six houses and the communities that might have a link with them, starting from there. Showing ethnic communities that we wish to involve them in developing the possibilities is a vital message in action. Getting an organisation that identification of image is a real break-through within those communities which usually feel excluded. It is a terrific starting point.

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