



Planning for a Sustainable Cultural Heritage Sector in a New Age

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SPECIAL COLLECTION:
COVID-19 AND THE
MUSEUM

SHORT REPORT

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ABSTRACT

This paper was prepared as part of the special collection on COVID-19 and the museum. The authors discuss the risks and uncertainties that the pandemic has introduced into the master planning process for cultural sites and resources. The paper concludes with reflections on how the heritage and cultural sector can best cope with these new realities.

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The role of planning has received growing attention in the professional and academic heritage literature over the last 30 years (e.g., Janssen et al. 2017; Logan 1995; Ross 2003). The evolution of planning discourse in the field of heritage studies reflects the evolution of planning theory more generally. For example, the consensus view today among scholars is that, at its best, planning can help actors prepare for uncertain futures and associated processes of adaptation (Patton 2011). In their recently published volume, for example, Kalman and Létourneau (2020) argue that the purpose of heritage planning is to “manage change wisely”.

But how can master planning processes empower the heritage sector to manage change wisely, especially in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic?

In this short paper, the authors reflect on this question by drawing on their collective experience in conducting commissioned planning work (or consultancies) for a wide range of public and private heritage sector clients worldwide.

In our professional experience, management plans for heritage sites invariably have three interwoven elements, all of which need to be reconciled fully if a sustainable future is to be realised: (a) sound governance to balance different values and interests, (b) clear operational strategies and (c) robust business plans.

In reality, financial considerations underpin all three since they are concerned primarily with what components of the plan can be delivered, when they can be delivered, and what phasing might be necessary to maintain public access, education and enjoyment. In managing programmes to actively preserve heritage assets over the long term, assessments of the level and sources of financial support are essential, since they correlate highly with, and are designed to describe, investment risk, return and overall business sustainability. Whilst this paper focuses on archaeological sites the issues raised are applicable to many, if not all, cultural and natural heritage sites.

Under normal circumstances, such financial and business planning considerations are modelled against an understanding of previous activity, detailed comparator studies and business modelling projections from a range of validated sources. Such plans are therefore rooted in precedents and are usually accompanied by sensitivity analyses, which set out the likely sources of risk together with the anticipated spread of financial implications associated with those risks. However, these are not normal circumstances.

The WHO declared Covid-19 as a pandemic on 11 March 2020,¹ and nearly every country put in place highly restrictive measures. Borders were closed, airlines grounded, in-country travel restricted, self-isolation advised and curfews imposed. Governments worldwide took unprecedented steps to try to balance the needs of their economies with those of the health of their citizens. As a result, for the first time in history economies were placed into government-engineered recession.

How long such measures will be enforced is anybody’s guess. Some countries are now easing restrictions as the positive effect of vaccinations becomes apparent. However, with the vast majority of the world’s population unvaccinated, it will take many months, probably years, before the world returns to some form of pre-Covid, unrestricted normal. Hence all organisations, from central government to local archaeological sites, need measures in place either to deal with, or at least accommodate, the effects of the virus over the short, medium and long terms.

But the pandemic also represents an opportunity to re-assess and re-balance old models and envisage a new paradigm for a sustainable future.

MANAGING UNCERTAINTY AND MASTER PLANNING RISK AT CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES

There is no doubt that heritage and cultural organisations, as a significant part of the tourism industry, have been severely affected by the pandemic since they have relied on the movement

¹ <https://www.who.int/dg/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>.

of people and the engagement of the visiting public to sustain their business models, both of which have been significantly reduced by the curtailment of travel, particularly air travel. This lack of movement has also applied to in-country travel as local curfews and travel restrictions have been enforced. Every country, and every region, has had to deal with the effect of the pandemic. No solution is universal, but all solutions share a common set of characteristics.

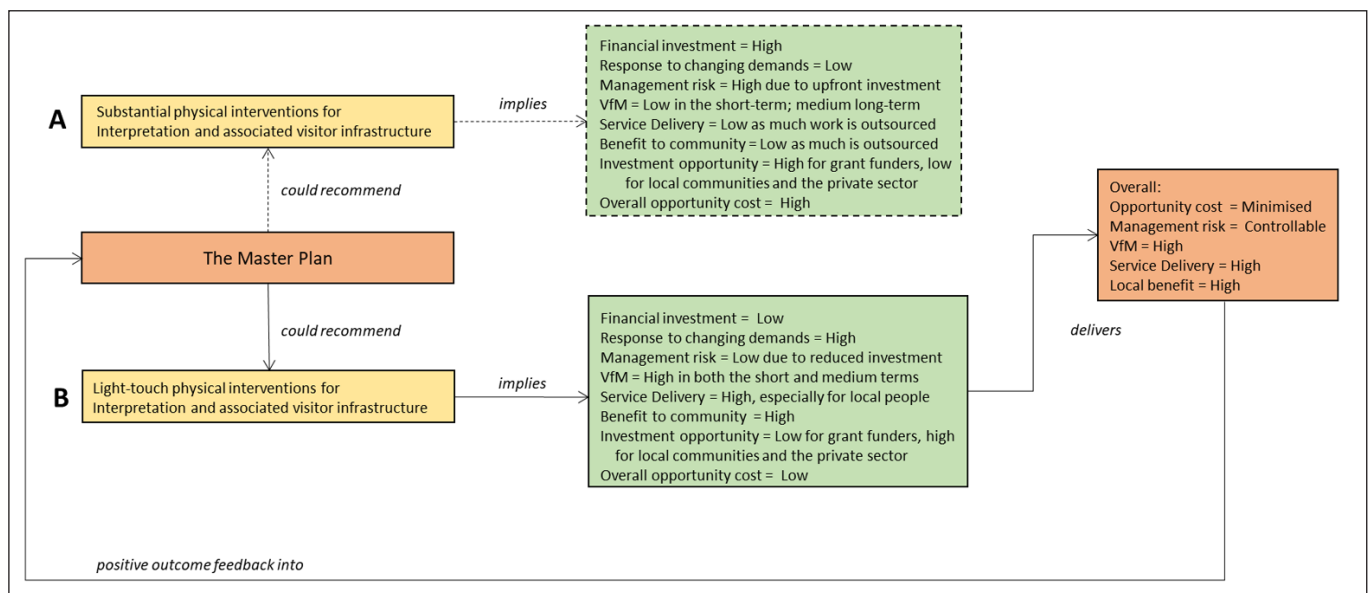
Not surprisingly, there have been numerous calls to rethink the future of tourism in light of these challenges (Gretzel et al. 2020; Ioannides and Gyimóthy 2020). Within this context, we reflect on two arenas that will be essential for the cultural heritage sector to ‘get right’ if it is realise the opportunities offered by the current crisis. Our reflections are informed by many decades of combined professional practice and academic work.

Covid-19 will, at some future date, be a memory. But because it is unclear when that collective memory will emerge, the immediate concern is what responses are needed, responsible and practical under existing conditions.

Traditionally, master and business plans for cultural heritage sites have been written from two primary perspectives (*Figure 1*):

- (A) Large scale, highly capital-intensive interventions to address issues of access, interpretation, visitor management, ticketing, on-site conservation and in-site travel based on a clear understanding of demand
- (B) Small scale, tightly-focused, light-touch and essentially reversible interventions in delicate environments or in those facing an uncertain future; most typically applied to nature reserves, SSSIs and archaeological sites under threat.

Figure 1 Master planning pathways.



Bearing in mind the level of financial risk involved in large-scale interventions at a time of global uncertainty, it may well be prudent now for sites to consider pursuing route B.

This is, in part, because over the last thirty years or so, governments have systematically tried to reduce direct public spending on cultural infrastructure and encouraged others, through the formation of trusts, charities, foundations and the like, to cover the majority of their operating costs by way of promoting tourism and other paid-at-site activities. The core principle promoted is that whilst the state retains ownership of the asset (for example, an archaeological site or national park) operational risk is covered, as far as possible, by earned income devolved to a bespoke, not-for-profit organisation whose primary income is derived from visitors, which in many cases are from overseas tourists.

This approach has been generally successful ... until now. For example, many UNESCO World Heritage Sites are managed on a day-to-day basis by a variety of not-for-profit organisations, whilst the assets themselves remain the property of the state. But with world tourism at a virtual standstill and with no horizon of a resurgence in sight (at least to pre-Covid levels), what can the state do to protect the primary asset, bearing in mind that operational profits generated by a not-for-profit operator are likely to remain at zero, or very low, for a long time to come?

Master planning in this context needs to be fleet-of-foot and adaptable. It needs to be capable of ensuring that necessary conservation interventions take place as a priority whilst at the same time making sure that the archaeological site, game reserve or other asset is able to respond quickly to changing visitor demands. Above all, it needs the flexible interplay of both public and private finance.

In such circumstances, the management plan can be effectively split into three financial elements:

1. Those elements that need to be funded by non-refundable grants for the conservation of the fabric of the monument as the primary resource – its protection in perpetuity is paramount.
2. Those elements that need to be funded by non-refundable grants for essential works to make the site accessible to visitors once the current pandemic has passed.
3. Those that need to be part-funded by non-refundable grants for visitor enhancement and interpretive works from which an increasing return from gate and other receipts can be envisaged over the long term.

Hence, whilst the first two are non-returnable and thus need underpinning public sector support, the third *could* be repaid over an agreed period if future circumstances allow. However, the underlying message here is two-fold:

- State intervention will be needed both to protect the cultural assets and to make them available to the public, at least for the foreseeable future, and
- Future uncertainties will require a more adaptive and flexible approach to managing visitor use and trends.

A PLANNING FRAMEWORK FOR THE SUSTAINABLE MANAGEMENT OF CULTURAL HERITAGE SITES

The circumstances resulting from the ongoing pandemic are challenging, but they also present an unprecedented opportunity to develop a new, more sustainable approach to cultural heritage preservation and tourism. Indicator-based, adaptive management frameworks, which are widely used in the management of national parks and related protected areas (Manning et al. 2017), provide a systematic approach for realising a more sustainable future for the cultural heritage sector as a whole.

Prior to the pandemic, the cultural heritage sector was often a victim of its own success, struggling with ‘overtourism’ (e.g., Dodds and Butler 2019). Many of the world’s most cherished sites experienced overwhelming growth in tourism, causing ecological and societal impacts that are difficult to reverse (Markham et al. 2016; Seraphin et al. 2018). Opportunities for authentic experiences of cultures, communities, and the natural environment were increasingly rare, inhibiting the global exchange of ideas and perspectives. The impacts of overtourism were most significantly felt by local people, as the quality of life in their communities was degraded, whilst the economic benefits of tourism often ‘leaked out’ to international interests. Much of this was a function of the prevailing approach within the cultural heritage sector to think of visitors as throughput and, in turn, to equate quantity with performance and hence financial sustainability.

In this moment, when the pressures of overtourism have relented temporarily, there is an opportunity for the cultural heritage sector to shift away from demand-driven preservation and management, to management by objectives for societal, environmental and economic outcomes. Existing frameworks, such as the US Interagency Visitor Use Management Framework (Cahill et al. 2018), can serve as a foundation for this shift. The key elements of such an approach include:

- Defining desired conditions for the protection of heritage resources, the authenticity of visitor experiences, and the character and quality of the life of local communities
- Formulating indicators that are reliable proxies for desired conditions and thresholds that specify desired conditions of indicators in measurable terms
- Implementation of monitoring programmes to regularly assess resource, societal and economic conditions
- Applying adaptive management strategies to sustain or return to desired conditions.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

Covid-19 generated three immediate threats – to public health, to economic well-being and to social stability. In the West, all three were addressed by governments invoking emergency powers accompanied by unrepresented borrowing and spending. Its longer-term effect in terms of the wider environment will take time to materialise, but there is no doubt that it will be real and long-lasting.

To become part of the recovery process the cultural heritage sector has to leave behind its approach to master planning and visitor management based on continuous growth either in terms of visitors or financial returns, or both and look to new models that take into consideration new kinds of uncertainties.

The pandemic has exposed the inherent fragility of received approaches, which now threaten the operational sustainability of many sites worldwide. This fragility is not unique to heritage: airlines, hotel chains, cruise lines and much of the leisure industry has all suffered because margins have been slim for a long time.

Whilst observers have, for many years, identified the risks from threats like climate change (e.g., Harvey and Perry 2015; Markham et al. 2016), Covid-19 has given a new urgency to issues of sustainable management across the entire cultural heritage sector.

This urgency applies as much to governance and long-term financial support, by way of public-private partnerships, as it does to the adoption of more adaptive and sustainable long-term practices on the ground.

We believe the approaches suggested in this paper can help to respond to the opportunities offered by Covid-19 in charting a way for the sector to emerge positively from its current circumstance.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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