

Neighborhood Archaeology: Exploring the Significance of Volunteers, Communities, and Local Politics for Contemporary Archaeology

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Some archaeological sites have impressive material finds and all have interesting stories about the past and their excavations. At the start of the twentieth century, a German archaeological expedition negotiated with the central Ottoman imperial government to excavate Megiddo, the famed Armageddon. As Neil Silberman (1982:168) explains, the German archaeologists at Tell el-Mutasellim negotiated with local village leaders for the right to excavate their land and paid hundreds of Palestinian peasants to dig. Rewarded for their finds, the local communities were a source of cheap labor in the search for a Biblical past. James Michener popularized the early excavators and their search in his novel *The Source*, but his focus was on the expedition team leaders, the local communities serving only as background to the research quest. In the 1960s, Yigael Yadin drew hundreds of volunteers from Europe and North America to provide the labor for excavating the fortified cliff top at Masada. Over time, volunteers became the main source for archaeological labor in Israel, recently even paying for housing, food, and academic credit to experience archaeology in a holy land. But again these volunteers often are relegated to the background when the excavation stories are told.

Today Megiddo and Masada are UNESCO World Heritage sites, part of a universal heritage for humanity with large numbers of tourists visiting the sites annually for their biblical meanings and history. The collection of conference papers in this issue of *Present Pasts* focuses on lesser known, but no less meaningful, archaeological sites and their stories, highlighting the interaction between volunteers, communities, and local politics, and giving overt consideration to what had been background until recently.

These are interesting and, the authors would argue, important dynamics for the socio-politics of archaeology; dynamics that late twentieth-century scholars recently have begun to examine in depth. Trigger (1984) exposed the colonial, imperial, and nationalist aspects of archaeology; Kohl and Fawcett (1995) expanded on the nationalism involved in archaeology; and Rowan and Baram (2004), among others, have considered the intersection of tourism and archaeology.

The growing literature on the significance of descendant communities for archaeological research makes clear the trajectory for the discipline. In the United States, the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) shifted the relationship between archaeologists and Native Americans, transforming the objects of study into collaborators. La Roche and Blakey (1997) wrote passionately on the implications of the African Burial Ground excavation in New York for communities and their interests and concern for ancestors. Along with NAGPRA, this early 1990s project helped transform American archaeology. More and more, the context of archaeological practice is recognized as fertile terrain for reflection and exploration as part of an excavation.

This collection of papers from the 2010 annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology provides examples of public archaeology as civic engagement within urban and suburban neighborhoods and explores the implications of archaeological research within complex social places. The articles in this collection focus on the social relations of the places they are studying, rather than the archaeological record, and the integration of volunteers, the significance of archaeological sites and historic structures for communities, and the local politics involved in historic preservation and neighborliness are seen as arenas for public archaeology's consideration.

The dynamics of neighborhoods, as the collection shows, are worth considering. Neighborhoods are places of polite social interactions based on spatial relationships. The interactions described in the papers are project-centered in that the partnerships between archaeologists and the local communities of the places being surveyed or excavated have been sought; multiple perspectives on the places under study have been encouraged; and volunteers form the bulk of the work force. The benefits of archaeology are stressed but there are useful caveats on the balance between scientific imperatives and community concerns in navigating challenging terrains.

The papers provide both theoretical and practical perspectives. The archaeologist as community activist is the suggestion in Uzi Baram's contribution, which highlights the search for archaeological remains of an early nineteenth-century maroon community in East Bradenton, Florida. The central premise of his article is that archaeologists have a role to play in community organizing; they can use the archaeological endeavor as a way to empower

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local stakeholders to pursue sustainable neighborhood preservation in the face of uncontrolled development.

Brent Weisman makes a useful distinction between neighborhoods – which are first and foremost places of residence – and communities – groups of people who share certain values but who may or may not reside in close proximity to one another. The two often have different perspectives and goals. Using as examples two archaeological projects conducted within African-American neighborhoods in Tampa, Florida, Weisman shows how the act of doing archaeology can benefit the neighborhood and the larger community regardless of any substantive excavation results.

Sioban Hart confronts the issue of how to identify what is valuable and significant about the past when multiple stakeholders have interests in, or wish to control, a site or sites. Using her heritage-based work in Deerfield, Massachusetts as an example, Hart outlines a “poly-communal” approach that actively negotiates what the focus of archaeological research will be, how the archaeological information will be studied and presented, and who will participate in the process. This approach offers a cosmopolitan past, one that addresses social justice.

Several papers provide illustrative case studies on conducting archaeology in a public arena. In his paper on the Bayshore Homes Project in St. Petersburg, Florida, Robert Austin documents over a century of mostly destructive interaction between this precolumbian Native American village site and the non-native, twentieth-century community that developed around it. He then describes the steps taken to achieve landowner cooperation, stimulate interest, and encourage preservation of an archaeological site when the residents who live at the site today have no direct historical relationship to the people who lived there several thousand years ago. The issues confronted are complex and multifaceted, but the work highlights the value that good communication can make in developing a community’s value of the past, even when it is not “their” past.

Michael Nassaney focuses on the development of common interests among the various stakeholders involved in the Fort Joseph Archaeological Project in Niles, Michigan. What began as an effort to relocate the eighteenth-century fort and trading post at the invitation of the neighborhood, has expanded into a multifaceted public education and outreach program. Nassaney describes the steps taken to encourage collaboration, partnerships, and involvement, as well as the conflicts that arise from this enterprise. The challenges of inclusion, especially as the archaeological project developed into a permanent presence in the community, explores the intersection of educational and economic interests for public archaeology.

While many of the projects presented here are the result of focused, long-term research and planning, Roger Grange describes a different type of public archaeology project in New Smyrna Beach, Florida. Here the remains of an eighteenth-century British settlement lie beneath houses, commercial buildings, and streets of a modern city. Absent a strong local historic preservation ordinance,

it has been primarily the work of volunteers who have researched and unearthed the archaeological remains of this important site. Grange provides an overview of the history of research at the Smyrna Settlement culminating in two grant-funded surveys, the nomination of several archaeological sites to the National Register of Historic Places, and the passage of a city ordinance that now requires archaeological survey within the settlement boundaries to identify significant sites before they are endangered by development.

In central Florida, the home of Disney World, natural habitats and historical structures are being replaced with “make-believe” environments and manufactured history. Jason Wenzel and Tiffany George use public archaeology as a means to expand environmental awareness among local residents, encourage heritage preservation, and reconnect with a rapidly disappearing “real” Florida. Their paper discusses several survey and excavation projects in historic neighborhoods near Orlando, Florida as a means of demonstrating the potential that archaeology has for addressing problems associated with a fast-growing metropolitan community. Interviews with visitors to the projects have provided the authors with insights into the perceptions and behaviors associated with contemporary tourism in the area and the role of archaeology in the burgeoning field of ecotourism.

Archaeologists have made great strides in collaborating with descendant communities but the array of ways that archaeologists are embedded in communities through civic engagement (Little and Shackel, 2007), community service learning (Nassaney and Levine, 2009), and political action (McGuire, 2008) is still developing. The studies in this collection are meant to extend and contribute to this effort at inclusiveness and cooperation among various stakeholders. By bringing out the neighborhood aspects of the archaeological projects, the collection invites further consideration of the implications of research in and of social places. Individually, the papers tell of challenges and successes; collectively they show that local communities, their residents, and politics are not just background for archaeology, but can be part of the research project. As these papers suggest, explicit consideration of volunteers, communities, and local politics open up the dynamics of place and time, key components for contemporary archaeology.

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