

Counter-Tourism: The handbook

Review of *Crab Man (Phil Smith) Counter-Tourism: The handbook*. Axminster: Triarchy Press.

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The term 'heritage', meaning 'that which may be inherited', arrived in English in about the year 1200, morphing via Old French from the Latin heres, heir. The term 'counter-tourism' arrived in English in the early 21st century, coined by Phil Smith, performance artist and writer.

Smith describes counter-tourism as a series of tactics which are designed to transform the way the tourist looks at places and to prompt thinking about the way the industry packages heritage.

It is an offspring of mythogeography, another of Smith's coinages. Mythogeography values journeying, sensitisation to the everyday, and keeping alive the many meanings of places in the face of increasing homogenisation. Counter-tourism was born of Smith's desire to understand whether his 'mis-guided tours' of urban, rural and wasteland areas really changed people's understanding and use of places, and, when restricted to heritage sites, whether the tactics could be broadened to the wider public.

Twenty years ago, a friend and I tried to avoid the pre-packaged Teutonic Knights of Malbork Castle by exploring fireplaces and disappearing behind doors into networks of passageways, in ways which didn't quite conform to the expectations of the attendant Polish grandmothers.

Like us, most tourists already want more than just a few exhibits in glass cases and an exit through the tea rooms and gift shop. So they pick and choose what they experience, and make it up as they go along, and practise counter-tourism with knowing. Counter-Tourism's pick'n'mix - of dozens of tactics, and ideas for how to extend these into more complex interventions that can be planned and performed at heritage sites - is for these tourists.

Smith observed that visitors to historic houses most strongly respond to artifacts to which they feel they have family connections. So he suggests this tactic for palaces: point at golden thrones, silver maces, full-size billiards tables and stuffed alligators, and shout loudly to each other 'Your granny had one of those!' Or another personalised tactic for monuments: fall asleep, and write a guide-book to the dreams you have there.

At the other end of the spectrum, he suggests trying to resist taking any significance at all from a visit to a heritage site. Then 'You'll feel the meaning-machines wriggling and stitching, trying to get back into your vacuum, and you may get a sense of how you make meaning without meaning to.'

Counter-tourism is about more than tactics at heritage sites. After all, in some sense this generation inherits the world from our forebears, so the etymology allows 'heritage' to be everything, not just the places designated as heritage sites by businesses and quangos.

Though not necessarily practising counter-tourism, Unseen Tours are already embodying this view of heritage. The Sock Mob, a volunteer network engaging with London's homeless people, aim to challenge views of what it means to live in London. They have coached homeless people as guides, to use their own experiences, historical and local knowledge to provide alternative walking

tours of London Bridge, Shoreditch and other areas. As Smith puts it, 'There are no heritage sites: only ticket offices and fences.'

For heritage site managers, Counter-Tourism promises a set of open 'infiltrations' that they can use to reinvent their own sites. But when it comes to the point, Smith actually addresses the counter-tourist who has been invited in by management and not management themselves. He allows management be intrigued, but charges them with cherry-picking and accommodation. Accordingly, he advises the counter-tourist to conduct their open infiltration as 'a war on two fronts'.

This highlights my main problem with the book. At first, it seems to be brimming with child-like enthusiasm that takes delight in, say, the fingerpost to Ham and Sandwich in Kent. But the militaristic language of counter-terrorism, infiltration, war on two fronts and 'shock and awe', coupled with the many examples and tactics drawn from war-related sites, just becomes tiresome.

Heritage warmongering is by no means limited to Smith - witness the recent BBC4 series entitled Heritage! The Battle for Britain's Past. Perhaps part of my problem comes from reading Counter-Tourism straight through, whereas it is really a handbook of ideas for employing. But could it be less 'counter'?

Smith does acknowledge that the clumsy materiality of the heritage industry doesn't look quite so bad in the face of the modern mania for ignoring memory, wiping slates clean, and erasing the local in favour of globalisation. So a greater emphasis could be placed on a creative remembrance, in the senses of both resisting forgetting and remembering what has been forgotten.

The challenge to the heritage industry is to avoid packaging certainties and closing off avenues of enquiry, and to present instead the uncertainties and the opportunities for 'journeying with'. A challenge which is summed up by Smith: 'Tourists are pilgrims, up for transforming themselves'.