

THE NEW TRIBAL CAMPFIRE. CULTURE-BASED PARKS AND ATTRACTIONS IN AN ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

Scott Ault *

21st-Century Tribalism

As the world becomes more connected, cultures have influenced each other and a “single, homogenous world culture” has begun to emerge. This has provided a wake-up call for peoples around the globe, and many cultural groups are working harder than ever to preserve their individual identities and pride in their communities. Local traditions and values are making a valiant comeback. Benjamin Barber has described this as a “tribalism” trend—operating in direct opposition to the forces that are leading us toward a homogenized “McWorld.”

In Europe, the national political boundaries that were established over the past two centuries are beginning to blur with the increasing influence of the European Community and introduction of the Euro. Across the continent, nationalistic sentiments are offset by the re-found pride that individuals are taking in their ancestral heritage. People are increasingly looking for their roots. They are looking for a sense of belonging as they discover that products are not culture.

Reviving Local Culture

The ease with which people are able to cross borders in Europe is adding to the rise of local and regional inward reflection. For some groups, this means re-awakening disappearing languages and customs that have become buried or stifled in rapidly changing societies. In the frozen northern territories of Norway, Sweden and Finland, for example, the Sami people have launched an ambitious attempt to revive their native language. In the last decade, they've published hundreds of books in Sami, a language banned in Norway's schools until the 1980s.

Traditional museums and cultural sites around the world are also trying to play their part, by protecting and displaying cultural artifacts. Of course, simply showcasing a people's artifacts is not necessarily the most effective way to represent a culture. In many traditional museum exhibits, culture is reduced to nothing more than a collection of objects—removed from their original contexts. The groups who created the objects often have little say in how their cultures are represented. And the exhibits become a glimpse into a point in time rather than a celebration of the rich beliefs and traditions at the heart of cultural identity.

For many cultural groups, the real challenge lies not in showing others who they were in the past, but in revealing who they are today and why their culture should matter to the contemporary world. Cave paintings viewed by firelight, medieval bards singing an epic tale, and even today's movies, television, and the internet are all methods people have used to express their identity. They are all forms of the traditional tribal campfire, a place of togetherness. A place where information was shared. A place for people to feel a sense of belonging and to identify their role within their culture. They were places for storytelling.

Storytelling, in fact, is humankind's oldest form of entertainment and education. Storytelling has been practiced around the family hearth, in the church and at the king's court. From that base, storytelling expanded into other venues: the theater, the cinema, the museum, and, yes, the theme park. It is—and always has been—one of the primary ways people share knowledge and beliefs. We all hold in our minds the images of ancient man casting shadows on cave walls, embellishing their stories with brilliantly colored paintings. And we can see storytelling in the late 20th century version of that bonfire, the television. Storytelling is one of, if not the, primary way we pass down culture to new generations.

Culture-based Parks and Attractions

We all know that tourism has grown to be the world's largest industry. But we may not be aware that 40% of that tourist Euro is spent on some kind of cultural experience. This figure is predicted to rise.

Fun-in-the-sun vacations are no longer good enough for many of today's tourists. Even though Europeans technically have more holiday time than most other countries in the world, actual leisure time is decreasing. People are craving more rewarding and enriching tourism experiences. They still want to be entertained. But they also want to be challenged, inspired and educated. And they want to experience something unique. In fact, many traditional sun and sand destinations like Spain are now banking on the idea that people are venturing beyond their resort hotels, apartments, and camping sites to experience more of the local region.

All this is adding up to a massive and ever-growing audience

for culture-based leisure destinations. More and more project developers are capitalizing on this trend by turning to the themed entertainment industry. The result is that we are witnessing a dramatic rise in parks and attractions with themes that deal with the cultural fabric of particular regions and nations. These are emerging as a new kind of “tribal campfire.” These destinations involve new settings and new technologies, but they serve the same purpose the tribal campfire did ages ago – the passing down of local lore and history to celebrate the past and inspire pride among its people.

Culture-based parks and attractions are not without their critics. The designers of EPCOT noted that foreign tourists often dislike the way the park depicts their home country. On the other hand, these same tourists enjoy the ways that other countries are represented. Everyone seems to object to their country being boiled down to a few clichés. However, when presented with the clichés of another part of the world, it becomes entertaining. And, some people don't like recreations, no matter how well done.

When creating culture-based parks and attractions, we must never lose sight of the fact that we hold a tremendous responsibility. We are middlemen, passing down humankind's most valuable possession: culture. Plush toys and other souvenirs are for a season. Culture is forever and, therefore, much more precious. We owe it to those who created it to pass it on faithfully—giving it renewed energy, while taking away nothing. And we owe it to future generations to represent it in a way that calls them and connects them to their real cultural heritage, not some cliché.

As creators of culture-based leisure destinations, we face enormous challenges. Two of the most difficult questions we must address are:

How can park owners and developers balance profitability with cultural responsibility to ensure that all audiences are satisfied?

And, how can leisure industry professionals help clients celebrate their traditions and heritage in ways that are compelling to new generations, but that also maintain a sense of cultural integrity?

It is possible to create culture-based parks and attractions that appeal simultaneously to tourists, investors and the cultural groups they represent, but it requires a unique approach. Remember the following four rules.

1. Empower Others to Tell Their Own Stories

How can theme park and attraction designers develop stories that are “authentic” to specific cultural groups?

The notion of authenticity is a slippery one at best. Cultures are always changing and evolving. What mainstream audiences consider authentic to a certain cultural group does not always match up with the way that group sees itself.

This makes it especially problematic for those of us who are outsiders to represent what we think is an authentic story or a typical tradition in another culture.

The best way to overcome this challenge is to involve the people we are representing from the very start of the project. “Involving” doesn't mean consulting with a few cultural representatives every now and then. It means inviting these people to be the driving force in the creative process.

The idea is that we shouldn't tell other people's stories for them. We should empower them to tell their own stories in new and compelling ways through the storytelling methods our industry has at its disposal. Think of the designer as a catalyst.

2. Provide a Context

Warwick Castle is a prime example of an attraction that provides audiences with a clear and compelling context. While some tourist find castles fascinating in their own right, simply for the grandeur and architecture, many tourists have a “if you have seen one, you've seen them all” attitude. That's because most of these places appear to be little more than piles of rock.

Warwick Castle is different. You step back in time and get a glimpse of life in the castle. You are taken to a specific day to witness the happenings around the site. On Easter Sunday, 1471, you see, hear and smell all of the castle's residents making preparations for the battle of Barnet. In addition to wax figures, The Tussaud's Group has also added a few live participants, playing the role of craftspeople from the period. These inhabitants actively engage visitors in conversations and answer questions about their lives and their roles in the politics surrounding Richard Neville, Earl of Warwick and the upcoming battle.

You become absorbed and curious about everything happening around you. The location took on added meaning and a new life. It became hallowed ground simply by providing a context and frame of reference through which to view it.

3. Make it Relevant to Contemporary Life

Today's audiences (especially teens) approach most educational attractions with two questions in mind: “So what?” and “Who Cares?” If you're designing a culture-based park or attraction, you need to answer these questions early in the process.

Some designers mistakenly assume that the solution is to load up a project with a lot of high-tech media and special effects. It's true that these entertainment tools can bring your project to life in captivating ways, but they won't necessarily help your audience see how your subject matter is relevant to their lives today. They might be wowed momentarily by the technology, but they'll most likely forget

what the experience was about in no time at all. And, within a short period of time, the attraction will look out-of-date because technology changes so rapidly.

To make a culture-based experience meaningful and memorable, you've got to relate it to your audience's lives today. When we look at the most popular stories from cultures around the world, we find that many of them deal with common, universal themes. If you can find these themes in your subject matter, you can begin to make connections across culture and through time. And you can even begin to capture the attention of MTV generation teens, who will come to realize that people in other cultures experience some of the same fundamental challenges, fears and joys that they do. This will leave a lasting impression on your audience.

4. Make it Entertaining

Again, you'll find that "entertainment value" comes mostly from the stories you tell. Play up the drama in your stories. Play up the sense of adventure. Make your audience a part of your stories. And take your audience on a journey that allows them to become part of the experience.

The Tower of London is a great example. Here, visitors have two options. You can walk through the castle on your own and look at various displays, such as the crown jewels and the ravens. Or you can take a guided tour, where you follow along behind a Beefeater, who tells wonderful stories of the goings on at the castle.

The Beefeaters play up the drama. Instead of just telling you who lived and died in the castle, they go into great detail about HOW they lived and HOW they died—all told with a little comedy, a little sex and a lot of intrigue. After you take the tour, you can then explore the castle on your own. Now, those crown jewels and the ravens mean something to you.

Once you've got a compelling story, you can find ways to make it come vividly to life with the amazing presentation tools our industry has at its disposal. This is where our media wizardry and high-tech gadgets come into play. But the simplest yet most powerful and timeless image is still that of our ancestors casting shadows on cave walls from the light of the tribal campfire, embellishing their stories with brilliantly colored paintings. They were creating magic. The world needs more magic and wonder.

*** Scott Ault**

Managing Director, BRC B.V., Amsterdam

As Managing Director of BRC in Europe, Scott manages all projects in Europe, Africa and the Middle East. In this role and as the former Vice President of Creative Development, Scott has greatly influenced BRC's growth and success and serves on its Executive Committee. An ambitious and versatile professional, Scott has a strong history of project management, art direction and design for museums, theme parks, film and television, including supervising design aspects of: the Mythos® theme park in Athens, Greece; Autry Museum of Western Heritage, Main Street Disneyland in Paris, the Gold of the Pharaohs traveling exhibit and the NFL Experience traveling exhibit. Scott holds a Bachelor's Degree of Fine Arts in Scenic Design and taught Entertainment Design at The Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, California.