

Between the Cliffs and the Sea: St Kilda and Heritage from Afar

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Introduction

The story of St. Kilda may be considered a narrative of the disastrous nature of human abandonment and environmental entanglements. The custodians of the island over many centuries eventually disappeared with the evacuation of the last inhabitant of St Kilda in 1930. However, now that ownership has been transferred to the state, the question has arisen as to who are the custodians of St Kilda. It could be said that the current owners, the National Trust, are the island's custodians, or since inscription on UNESCO's World Heritage List, arguably everyone is a custodian due to the outstanding universal value. This fuzziness of custodial rights and responsibilities might be regarded as an opportunity for locals (hosts) and visitors (guests) to enter into an open and transparent dialogue in the co-creation of the cultural experience activated by the site.

This paper describes how the small island community group of *Ionad Hiort* is experimenting creatively in the development of an island heritage centre that 'moves beyond the museum' and towards a new form of cultural experience. We explore how this on-going project approaches both the concepts of tourism culture and of custodianship, in relation to St Kilda, through strategic design thinking and integration into the growing tourism of the proximate islands of Lewis and Harris. We look at how the needs of the community may be met through a remote access centre that can share St. Kilda's story 'from afar', whilst promoting engagement with change and innovation within both 'host' and 'guest' communities. The planned St Kilda Centre in the township of Uig provides a case study for the resourceful and innovative development of Scotland's remote heritage assets. The concepts of custodianship and tourism culture align to establish a model for the co-creation by locals and visitors of a cultural experience that acknowledges not only past, but also present and future, artefacts and traditions; a situation where change is embraced and innovation encouraged. After all, human ingenuity and innovation are central to the establishment and narratives of remote communities, such as St Kilda, located in extreme and challenging environments, to which we remain drawn in the twenty-first century.

This paper stems from an ongoing seven-year project to develop this idea, in the community of Uig on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. It focuses on the period of 2014-2016, during which a variety of stakeholders including The Glasgow School of Art (GSA), the World Heritage Organisation (WHO), and multiple design consultants have provided valuable insight and direction for the community group. The case study uses data from semi-structured interviews, desk research, and participant observation that reflect on the ongoing story of the project, focusing on key moments

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across its development. In this chapter, we first look at the history of St. Kilda, followed by an exploration of heritage and its relation to tourism/economic development programmes. We critically explore this through the concept of the tourist gaze (Urry and Larsen 2011), followed by a theorisation of the term custodianship (Canavan 2016). We then use the case study of the St Kilda Centre as an exploration of those themes, analysing its developments through the lens of custodianship. We conclude with the next steps for the project.

St. Kilda: Beyond the fall from grace

St. Kilda is an archipelago of small islands about 80 kilometres off the coast of the Outer Hebrides in the North Atlantic Ocean (Fig.1). More than 2000 years of human habitation illustrate an entanglement between people and the elements of nature, including harsh weather, limited resources and the tenacity to develop a way of life on a small area of land surrounded by sea. Although not a unique example (Easter Island and Lord Howe Island in the Pacific are others), St. Kilda has over the last two millennia maintained a tenuous relationship between the sea, the cliffs and the people who have lived within its territory (Fig. 2). Its history has been broadly covered (Geddes and Gannon 2015) and will be explored briefly here, beginning in the 1700s. (Insert Figures 1 and 2 here)

It was not until smallpox and cholera impacted the main island of *Hiort* in the eighteenth century that an outside influence began to play a major role, leading to the loss of a large portion of its small (180) population (Stride 2010). During this period, increased visitation and interest from the British mainland brought about new visitor/host relationships; the St. Kildans would ‘perform’ their cliff climbing skills for the various visitors arriving ashore (Geddes and Gannon 2016). The population continued decreasing to just under 100 in 1920 and eventually to 34 by 1930, when the British government decided to evacuate the final members of the village in what may best be described as a forced eviction. Yet, the story of St. Kilda does not end there.

Since the evacuation, the island has maintained an important military presence - as a listening station during the Second World War and in modern times as a radar station for the Royal Artillery (Hebrides) Missile Range. Today, the islands are managed by the National Trust for Scotland, with sections leased to the Ministry of Defence and conserved in collaboration with Historic Environment Scotland. In the last thirty years, the islands have been recognised by the World Heritage Organisation for their outstanding universal value across a variety of cultural and natural criteria. Scientists and researchers study the wildlife, marine life, geological, archaeological and historical aspects of the islands. The number of visitors grows each year and there is a desire to increase access to St Kilda for cruise ships, yachts, and visitors from the Isles of Lewis, Harris, and North Uist. However, the remoteness and unique biological and archaeological aspects of St. Kilda are threatened by this increase in visitation and use; many consider that it is being ‘loved to death’.

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Heritagisation and heritage tourism

The term 'heritage' is defined by multiple agencies; in particular, ICOMOS (2015) defines cultural heritage as 'an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values'. The idea that heritage is something passed down is taken up by many national and local agencies, who attend not only to cultural heritage but also to the historic environment, which is 'the physical evidence for human activity that connects people with place, linked with the associations we can see, feel and understand' (Scottish Government 2013). In this sense, the idea that heritage is artefactual, but also linked with identity and significance of place and feeling, is of key importance in understanding how heritage or the historic environment is viewed in this region.

In Scotland, national organisations such as Historic Environment Scotland, the National Trust for Scotland and various other agencies carry out the conservation and preservation of structures, sites, and landscapes. These agencies are entrusted to protect the heritage of the nation, providing the AHD (authorised heritage discourse) (Smith 2006). This discourse proclaims the official story of a region and integrates it into the maintenance and development of a national narrative. For many researchers, heritage relates not to the past, but to the present; it is constructed by the people of the present and is informed by current perceptions of history than the material entities of the past (Lowenthal 1985). In this view, conservation is the management of the past from the perspective of present needs, telling certain stories and omitting others. This storytelling construction, to Hall (1999: 3), is 'a complex of organisations, institutions and practises devoted to the preservation and presentation of culture and the arts ... to keeping what already exists'. In line with this idea of institutional knowledge, heritage is the promotion of a 'consensus of history by state-sanctioned cultural institutions and elites to regulate cultural and social tensions in the present' (Smith 2006: 3). This form of heritage is influenced by Romantic ideals and serves to perpetuate a pastoral, agrarian lifestyle, void of labour and hardship (Riley and Harvey 2007).

Today, the 'post-productivist' society has led to a greater appreciation of St. Kilda, not only as a place for recreation, but as a place to learn about the unique island culture; a place where heritage becomes the attraction. Edensor has cautioned about the commodification of heritage in fixing places in time (Edensor 2008: 330), whereas Urry and Larsen (2011:154) see it, not just as commodifying history, but as 'reproduced through performances made possible through networked relationships between organisations, machines, and especially buildings'. The tendency of heritage tourism to lead to the '*heritagisation*' of the heritage asset, where the indigenous community are cast as actors in a staged history for the consumption of visitors, is well documented (Smith 2006, Ronström 2008). Heritage tourism, often described as providing 'the only road to survival' (Ronström 2008:1), whilst providing a financial model in the short term, may not necessarily be in the interests of the local community at large in the long term. Its ideal drives many of the people's lives, being hailed as a force for regeneration of a region (Riley and Harvey 2007, Urry and Larsen 2011). For example, throughout

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Britain, groups such as the Arkwright Society or New Lanark Trust, carry out conservation and preservation of structures, sites, and industrial landscapes, not only in the interest of protecting a particular site, but in providing improvement to a region in economic decline. Heritage as economic regenerator has had a long history in the United Kingdom, with examples from as early as the 1960s and 1970s. For example, the regeneration of Wirksworth in the Peak District during the late 1970s with the assistance of the Civic Trust, had significant economic results in terms of population growth, inward investment in communities and a growing creative sector. The achievements of the Winkworth Project being recognised through the presentation of a 'Europa Nostra' award in 1983 (Gordon and Percival 1984). In Scotland, the promotion to World Heritage status of New Lanark and its eventual protection and rehabilitation have transformed the former mill into a tourist attraction for the region, but possibly at the cost of the region's overall identity (Bramley 2001, Landorf 2009) and the estrangement of lower income townspeople, who have been forced to move away due to higher property values and lack of work.

The commodification of heritage, therefore, may engender a situation where the artefacts and cultural history of a place are 'owned' by local interests that regard their role as the packaging and delivery of the visitor experience. The past, or more precisely a sanctioned version of the past, is then valorised and foregrounded, diminishing the space for change and more importantly for local innovation. The situation is particularly evident in those rural settlements geographically remote from urban centres and even more so in island settings, where the economic opportunities alternative to tourism are limited and the space to challenge tourism conventions is restricted. The notion of performing for the visitor is not new, as shown by Ronstrom (2008); his vision of a dystopian future of local actors and visiting consumers essentially disenfranchises local people from pursuing alternative futures to those founded on the re-packaging of the past. Similar to the cliff-top performances of St. Kildans for tourists referred to previously, Ronstrom's vision highlights the tendency for heritage tourism to promote remoteness, both geographically in relation to urban centres and temporally in relation to contemporary life, which in turn denotes such places as peripheral and marginal to the present world. One might distill Ronstrom's argument into the following: present needs being met through promotion of a particular version of the past at the expense of the future, where the lens of nostalgia fails to register 'precisely that which made islands central to previous times' (Ronstrom 2008: 1), namely innovation and the exploitation of settlement networks.

The tourist gaze and Scottish 'wilderness'

The development of tourism in the West stems from the Ancient Roman aristocrats attending to their empire, to the pilgrimage routes of Santiago de Compostela in the Middle Ages, and to the mass tourism of British seaside resorts in the nineteenth century. A tourist is thus someone who engages in something extraordinary, outside their ordinary everyday life (Urry and Larsen 2011). Although this binary can be challenged, it shows how tourism may be a useful tool in understanding how people

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identify with other cultures and their circumstances. The tourist is out to *see* - a perspective of view and gaze (Boyer 1996) where the landscape (or building, site, etc.) is something to be viewed like a painting or photograph, based upon the eye and what is present 'out there'. This 'tourist gaze' (Urry and Larsen 2011) is not, however, just about engaging with the eyes, but also with the body; the concept moves beyond simply looking and involves, rather, the relationships and social constructions of how visitors engage and perform with the place they are visiting. These embodied practices include walking and engaging in discourse with residents (or the indigenous culture). A collective performance is developed through these embodied practices within the tourist space. In the case of heritage and tourism the tourist and resident engage in a variety of performances and views that showcase the politics of the space where control and power, identity and the 'ownership' of the past is present.

Views of the Scottish Highland and Island landscape recall lonely figures gazing upon infinite spaces or castles in the distance, like Robert Gibb's painting of Borthwick Castle from 1831. In Scotland, this view and 'gaze' is translated into the countless Romantic views or 'romantic gazes' inspired from nineteenth century paintings, twentieth century travel posters and literature that harks back to a 'Golden Age' of the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. Urry and Larsen (2011) have described a romantic gaze as the individual's view within the landscape, taking in the entirety of what they see. A romantic gaze is exemplified by the way that personal views of lonely travellers, desolate beaches and uninhabited spaces bring the viewer into intimate connections with the landscape. This gaze is reinforced in tourism campaigns, advertisements and social media sites and thus is engrained in the mind of the visitor, engendering expectations of lonely places and a Scottish 'wilderness'. In the case of St. Kilda, visitors to the islands from the eighteenth century had similar visitor/host expectations, as the inhabitants would showcase their talents for cliff climbing to the mainlanders (Geddes and Gannon 2016). This embodiment of the romantic gaze, however, limits the way that the visitor engages with not only the landscape but also the heritage of the site. It also limits the way that the resident (or host) sees themselves and the tourist within the gaze, often resenting the tourist for commodifying their past or abusing them for having the 'right' to view their heritage. As has been suggested in the last two sections of the chapter, the AHD and other forms of heritage-making regard heritage as something 'claimed', as an extraction, and as an amalgamation of all stories into a single narrative. There is a need in the twenty-first century to move beyond these notions of commodity, asset, and gaze towards a fluid notion of co-creation and co-ownership.

Custodianship

Recent academic research defines heritage as an emergent material and immaterial process (Smith 2006, Harvey 2015). There is a presence and embodied practice inherently bound to heritage in which DeSilvey (2006:415) sees a way of 'working with the grain' of materials, such that a repressed past comes to life and with it, a creation of aural, temporal and visual senses with an emphasis on the physical (Tilley 1994: 150). Heritage can thus be considered a process of makings, within a relational encounter

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with the material and immaterial components. This understanding resonates with Canavan's idea of tourism culture.

Canavan (2016: 229) in his exploration of the concept of tourism culture describes a space where 'tourism culture can be seen as the product of the melange of host and guest cultures that occur in a destination'. In contrast to Ronstrom's model of heritagisation where locals are typecast, in turn typecasting visitors and engendering staged behaviours in both, Canavan highlights the opportunities for co-creation of cultural experiences where the hosts (locals) and the visitors (guests) play complementary roles in a creative alliance. In the heritagisation model the past is often regarded as under threat from the present, the local role is defined as that of proprietor rather than facilitator, a conservative mentality is reinforced and innovation is stifled. The tourism culture model, on the other hand, through the blend of external influences and local traditions, anticipates and exploits change through innovation as the basis for sustainable tourism. Accordingly, neither locals nor visitors are trapped in a version of themselves; rather, they are encouraged to participate in a developing situation where the challenges and opportunities of their interactions are acknowledged and built upon. As Canavan (2016: 238) notes, the nuanced and flexible host/guest interactions recognise 'on the one hand the persistence of originating cultures, whilst on the other appreciating the evolution and change in these as a result of the wider influences including tourism.'

The concept of custodianship establishes an explicit relationship between the heritage asset and the inherent obligations of the present incumbents to those of the future and as such can be regarded as empathetic to the tourism culture model and antithetic to Ronstrom's heritagisation model. Whilst inheritance is central to the concept of custodianship, heritage seen through a custodial lens transforms the inheritor's role from that of proprietor to that of facilitator. The custodial acknowledgment of temporal possession potentially opens the space for a more open and diverse dialogue between local and external parties, in turn offering the opportunity for co-creation of the cultural experience and a more agile management and sustainable development of the heritage asset.

Ionad Hiort: towards co-creation of heritage

On the west coast of the Isle of Lewis is the small township of Uig. Its scattered villages hug the bay, protected from the brunt of storms from the North Atlantic. Known as the place where the famed Lewis Chessmen were discovered, the Uig area, though beautifully rugged, shares many of the island's problems. For the last thirty years, a steady decrease of families, young folk and jobs has limited the growth of the region (HallAitken 2007). The consolidation of schools, the loss of military installations and concerns of limited support from the council have exacerbated these problems and the local communities have had to develop new ways to keep their communities intact.

The community group of *Ionad Hiort* ('St. Kilda Centre' in Scottish Gaelic) has been working towards a notion of custodianship in its development of a new type of heritage-making. Since 2010 *Ionad Hiort* has worked with a variety of stakeholders,

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including Historic Environment Scotland, The Glasgow School of Art, the local Council and the Highlands and Islands Enterprises, to develop a space that moves ‘beyond the museum’ and towards a new definition of heritage and identity through the development of an island centre. The project initially came about through the creation of the St. Kilda Opera, a £1.5 million, five-country project, developed by Scotland's Gaelic Arts agency, *Proiseact nan Ealan*, in 2007. This opera, inspired by the cliffs, people and history of St. Kilda used creative techniques to unite five countries in a live performance in Gaelic from the cliffs, presenting an hour-long story of the island narrative (McKenzie 2007). In 2010, the *Ionad Hiort* group was created to oversee the then nascent idea of creating a remote centre. Running parallel to these developments, the World Heritage Organisation selected St. Kilda as a case study for remote access heritage conservation and interpretation (UNESCO 2012), in part due to the production of a 3D laser scan of the islands through the 2009 collaboration between Historic Scotland and the GSA’s Digital Design Studio (since renamed School of Simulation and Visualisation), titled the CDDV.¹ The scans formed part of a larger project idea of remote access and its use as a telematic approach to heritage. After a three-year period of contentious competition across the Western Isles, *Ionad Hiort* won the final commission to work on a feasibility study for the development of the centre (Maclean 2010). In *Ionad Hiort*’s proposal it was recommended that a new centre using remote access technologies should be built overlooking the cliffs of Mangerstadh (Fig.3). The site was chosen for its similarity to the topography of St. Kilda as well as for its visual connection back to the archipelago, making it a unique surrogate for the actual site (Ionad Hiort 2017). The heritage centre’s visualisation technologies would not just provide virtual access to the islands during inaccessible times of the year, but would create a whole new type of experience that otherwise could not be achieved, even by physically visiting the islands. The project aim was, through the combination of visitors, technologies, narratives and residents, to develop a twenty-first century research and visitors’ centre.

(Insert Figure 3 here)

Much of this work has been done through local community investigations, revolving around workshops and one-on-one talks where narratives and ideas are held in ‘creative tension’ or ‘negative capability’ (McAra-McWilliam 2007), to seek not a final solution but many alternatives that would be able to work for the community. It was during this period of development from report and commission towards mission statement that the Glasgow School of Art’s Institute of Design Innovation (GSA) was introduced to *Ionad Hiort* by Highlands and Islands Enterprises in 2013, with the intention that the GSA could be both a sounding board and critical friend or ‘tourist’. Particularly, work over the course of six months in 2014 involved a series of visits where community members of *Ionad Hiort* met with staff of the GSA and reflected upon what a new type of island centre would be like (Jaramillo 2017). GSA staff in their adopted role as ‘tourists’ enabled alternative ideas to come forward and promoted an open attitude. In the end, *Ionad Hiort* created artefacts from drawings, charts, and

¹ CDDV is Centre for Digital Documentation and Visualisation. Since 2015, Historic Scotland has been renamed Historic Environment Scotland.

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stories to interpret what the community and group wanted from the centre (Fig.4). This co-creation of strategy provided the group with a much-needed boost to their confidence, pushing them towards a new co-created plan and prospectus.

(Insert Figure 4 here)

From 2015 to 2016 *Ionad Hiort* moved towards the realisation of their strategy by commissioning three consultants to aid in developing the new heritage centre through the creation of a fund-raising prospectus. This had three briefs: content (Metaphor, London), design (Dualchas Architects and Reiulf Ramstad Arkitekter) and business (Steve Westbrook, Economist). The consultants provided a unique opportunity for *Ionad Hiort's* voice to be manifest and promoted. They worked with the group to understand its requirements through site visits, workshops, and in-depth interviews with local residents and also used the findings of the GSA and other previous work, including the Rebanks (2015) Report that established a sound economic basis for having a centre in Uig. Seasonal increases in visits by cruise ships to the Isle of Lewis has provided a new impetus for the establishment of a much-needed facility, with coaches from the main island settlement of Stornoway travelling to the west coast of the island where the proposed facility is to be located. Finally, in August 2017, there was a major step forward with the publication of the final prospectus and the presentation of the master plan at a St Kilda Symposium in Stornoway. Here, in front of major stakeholders, including the Heritage Lottery Fund, Historic Environment Scotland and the National Trust, *Ionad Hiort* presented a wholly new concept that was at its core the group's idea. The group now needs to move ahead with the establishment of funding cycles as the project has a relatively high capital cost.

The idea of the centre has been positively received by Peter Debrine of UNESCO and government ministers, including Lord Dunlop (Stornoway Gazette 2016). There is also support from the broader heritage sector as the centre is seen as a way to generate local jobs and improve economic activity within the region. The specific plans, however, have not been without their critics; many believe that there could be other approaches to developing the centre than by constructing a £9 million structure. One possibility might be to build small structures in a phased development that would allow for the ebb and flow, and the fickle nature, of tourism. The accepted scheme could also be criticised for the fact that it used paid consultants, who provided their own agenda and had preconceived notions about the themes of the centre. Yet, the overall co-creation of this centre from art piece to community group, from art school to consultants, shows how custodianship and co-creation can be a way of developing a new type of heritage centre. A recent review of the work shows continued support for construction from government ministers. It is possible that, in the development stages of the project, further visitor input and the ongoing growth in visits from Stornoway will provide new ideas to enhance its design.

Conclusions

Communities in the western isles thrive, grow and work within the constraints presented by these islands. Currently many projects, located on the island fringes, are seeking

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innovative ways to attract, maintain and sustain healthy levels of community. The work of *Ionad Hiort* and its co-creation of heritage through the proposed St. Kilda centre is representative of such rural innovation. As has been discussed, there is some contention between the preservation of heritage and the commodification of that heritage for the consumption of tourists. This chapter has discussed how heritage bodies, local people and tourists may come together in the co-creation of heritage, based on the notion that the tourist is an embodied practitioner in heritage-making rather than just a viewer. The new centre, with its great potential for co-creating heritage and involving the tourist, not as consumer or even performer of heritage, but rather as custodian of it in the same way as the host, would lead to new approaches to theorising heritage. It is to be hoped that this project will continue to push the boundaries of what it means to claim rights over a historical place, to rethink the ways that heritage is performed and created, and to consider how ideas of rural innovation can be employed at a global level.

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