Maya Architecture and Interpretation: Chichén Itzá as part of the Cultural Heritage Narrative

Interpretación y Arquitectura mayas: Chichén Itzá como parte de la Narrativa de Patrimonio Cultural

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Abstract

Architecture acts as the visual embodiment of culture in heritage tourism, suggesting a narrative history of "place." At Chichén Itzá issues of commercialism and development have at times eclipsed this cultural narrative, instead becoming themselves central to the understanding of the architectural complex as a modern site of Yucatán Maya identity. Since the inception of mass tourism to the area in the 1970s, the site has seen visitors from all over the world come to experience the archaeological remains for religious, spiritual, educational, and leisure purposes. Despite this fame, however, the Chichén Itzá interpretation is representative of a number of common issues associated with the popular presentation of archaeological sites, particularly the introduction of mass tourism, and the shift toward commercialization and accessibility of the site at the expense of the local Maya heritage. Despite these significant concerns, the complex at Chichén Itzá can be interpreted as representative of both the ancient and modern Maya populations through the active participation of local Maya residents in the archaeological management of the site. Heritage interpretation exemplifies an increasingly faceted and evolving discourse, where emerging practices are investigated, allowing for a gradient of "successful" endeavors, which are judged using a variety of criteria. With parallels to ancient Maya political structure and history, and under these emerging criteria, the interpretation of the site can be told through historical Maya connections with an emphasis on looking to the past for cues, and accommodating changing needs in architecture.

Key Words: *Chichén Itzá, Public Archaeology, Commercial Archaeology, Cultural Heritage, Architectural Restoration*

Resumen

La Arquitectura actúa como la personificación visual de la cultura en el turismo patrimonial, sugiriendo una historia narrativa de "lugar". En Chichén Itzá los temas sobre comercialización y desarrollo han eclipsado en ocasiones esta narrativa cultural en lugar de volverse ellos mismos aspectos centrales para comprender el complejo arquitectónico como un moderno sitio de la identidad maya en el Yucatán. Desde los orígenes del turismo en masa en el área en los años 70 y enormemente afectado por la creciente industria turística, el lugar ha visto llegar a turistas de todo el mundo para experimentar los restos arqueológicos por motivos religiosos, espirituales, educativos y de ocio. Sin embargo y pese a esta fama, la interpretación de Chichén Itzá es representativa de un número de temas comúnmente asociados a la presentación de lugares arqueológicos particularmente la introducción del turismo en masa y el cambio hacia la comercialización y accesibilidad del sitio a expensas del patrimonio maya local. A pesar de estas significativas preocupaciones,, el complejo de Chichén Itzá puede ser interpretado como representativo tanto de las antiguas como de las modernas poblaciones mayas a través de la participación activa de los residentes locales mayas en la gestión arqueológica del sitio y a través de la conexión teológica de la interpretación de las prácticas culturales de los antiguos maya. La interpretación patrimonial ejemplifica un discurso en creciente desarrollo y crecientemente multidimensionado, donde las prácticas que están surgiendo son investigadas, permitiendo un gradiente de prácticas "exitosas" que son juzgadas utilizando diversos criterios. De forma paralela a la antigua estructura e historia políticas mayas y bajo estos criterios emergentes, la interpretación del sitio puede ser contada a través de las conexiones históricas mayas, poniendo el acento sobre la investigación del pasado para buscar pistas y acomodando las cambiantes necesidades en arquitectura.

Palabras clave: *Chichén Itzá, Arqueología Pública, Arqueología Comercial, Patrimonio Cultural, Restauración Arquitectónica*

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1. Architecture and the Cultural Heritage Narrative

The presentation of archaeological remains for public consumption dates almost to the inception of archaeology as a practice. Early examples, such as Sir Arthur Evan's reconstruction at Knossos, highlight the public interest in cultural heritage as early at the turn of the 20th century, and the need for intervention by archaeologists to ensure the universal understanding of the cultural remains. The Athens Charter in 1931, the Venice Charter in 1964, and the UNESCO 1972 conference address the importance of world heritage, which has since become synonymous with historic preservation and archaeological presentation. As part of this dialogue, remnants of the past help to define a world culture and provide a basis for continued architectural evolution, while at the same time supplying a form of entertainment for holiday adventures. In the last 30 years, however, presenting these cultural heritage remains to the public has become a research profession in itself, suggesting the transition from archaeological tourism as a form of entertainment, to archaeological management as a source of international public obligation and education.

At the turn of the 20th century, many archaeologists excavated outside of their home countries for a variety of purposes, driving the rise of "neocolonial archaeologies," which essentially addressed areas of world cultural significance with little regard for local populations (Lydon and Rizvi 2010: 35). As this type of archaeological practice forever changed the heritage fabric of a particular area, it introduced the influential context of the cultural heritage narrative in understanding the presentation of ancient sites architecturally and in an educationally contextual way. Throughout this transition, a number of issues have arisen with regard to presenting cultural remains, particularly those associated with architecture. Many sites face the problem of how much to restore to ensure that the public understands the material, without "over-interpreting" the remains through extensive reconstruction projects, or creating questions in the historical narrative as a result of the intervention. Architects and archaeologists must weigh the information excavated at the site to provide a basis for restoration, but when little information exists, a portion of the intervention becomes educated guesswork, with constantly evolving theories and architecture forced to adapt.

With these and other concerns to maneuver, architecture in various forms has become one of the more influential methods in the presenting history, place, and identity, whether through historic preservation/restoration practices or through the iconographic representation of ancient peoples and cultures (Lynch 1972). Architecture can be used to illustrate local construction traditions, house artifacts, or even become a cultural symbol in itself. Through these methods, architecture at archaeological sites impacts the way that the surrounding world views a particular place of heritage, and is therefore integral in interpretation.

For Chichén Itzá, the architectural fabric is particularly important to the heritage interpretation, and represents a substantial collection of building artifacts to help understand the site. As a major power late in Maya occupation of the area, the extensive architectural and archaeological remains present an opportunity for interpretation that goes beyond standard heritage practices, and uses the history of the site itself to create a dialogue with visitors, as demonstrated in the treatment of spaces and through the involvement of the community. From the clearing of the plazas to the restoration/reconstruction of important monuments, the architecture at Chichén Itzá represents both ancient and modern Maya practices, becoming a symbol of cultural community influence, appropriate to an "authentic" historical interpretation of the site.

2. Publicity, Accessibility, and Rebirth

Chichén Itzá rose to become a significant power in the Maya civilization by the beginning of the Terminal Classic Period (circa 900 CE). The site, which featured complex architectural planning, included as much as five square kilometers in just the city core. While much of the site seems to have survived structurally intact since occupation, the main civic

Figure 1. The surviving Civic Precinct at Chichen Itza showing several important structures. Photo by author, 2007.

precinct in particular houses several important buildings **(Fig. 1**) which reflect Puuc and Chenes architectural traditions, popular in the Maya regions. As the city prospered during the Terminal Classic period, it was home to residents who subscribed to a variety of heritages and their associated architectural and artistic traditions, leaving the city an amalgamation of styles, and resulting in "hybrid" crafts reflecting the efforts of Itzá aristocrats, Yucatecans, and Mexica (Henderson 1997: 213). This suggests that recognizable visual culture was important to the city's residents, and influenced their use of traditional styles in displayed heritage, an idea that parallels the modern use of the site as a location of identifiable history and culture.

Although the site is said to have metaphorically "collapsed" between the 12th and 15th centuries CE, the result was a decline in power, yet the site was never completely abandoned (Henderson 1997: 225). Later discoveries suggest that the location was perpetuated as important as part of the living memory of the locals, and thus was never completely "lost" as with some archaeological discoveries (Morley 1925). By the 16th century, the area around Chichén Itzá was occupied by cattle haciendas and the somewhat exposed architecture is referenced in a number of 18th and 19th century Spanish sources, which also describe the geography of the area (Bregalia 2006: 67). In the mid-19th century, American explorer John Lloyd Stephens, together with his friend and painter Frederick Catherwood, documented their travels to the area, giving early researchers a first indication of how the site held up over time. Through a travel journal and series of paintings, the explorers described a trek along cattle paths with the view of the buildings surviving in the jungle. While the local foliage and cattle farming encroachment had overtaken much of the site, Stephens describes the Castillo "rising high above the plain," clearly still visible, and Catherwood produced an accompanying watercolor painting (Stephens 1848). The Castillo would prove to be an exponentially popular subject for archaeologists, artists and explorers in the years that followed.

When excavations at Chichén Itzá began in the early 20th century, first under Edward Herbert Thompson, who was inspired to explore the site by Stephens' writings, and then as a joint effort between the Carnegie Institution

and Mexican government, many of the original structures were still standing, and in need of cleaning and consolidation. By the 1920s, the site had been widely publicized, and was featured in two National Geographic articles from February 1922 ("The Foremost Intellectual Achievement of Ancient America") and January 1925 ("Chichen Itzá, An Ancient American Mecca"), both written by American archaeologist Sylvanus Griswold Morley. Morley's pieces not only presented the world with photos of the site as it appeared to archaeologists, but also debated the ongoing reconstruction and restoration projects that were intended to improve the site for tourism, and featured posed photos of local Maya descendants on the site. Although the captions of Morley's photograph at times betray an uncomplimentary impression of the local population, it is clear that he was aware how important the site was to the local community, and wished to see it returned to its former glory.

Morley's articles and the publication of the archaeological finds helped to increase international awareness of the site and its residents. The installation of artifacts excavated from the Cenote Sagrada at the Harvard University Peabody Museum brought the artistic traditions to life, popularizing Chichén Itzá to a modern and foreign audience, while promoting the site as a modern tourism destination for the western elite, who were intent on seeing the cultural remains of the once-great civilization. While infrastructure in the area was established as early at the 1870s under Mexican president Porfirio Díaz in order to rebrand the area as "modern," and "civilized", Governor Felipe Carrillo Puerto later saw the increased potential opportunity to commercialize the site during the excavations and facilitated an infrastructural project with a group of interested Yucatecans to draw more tourism to Chichén Itzá and other regional archaeological sites based out of Pisté (Eiss 2008: 525-52). As a result, the community rose from an initial 500 residents to 4000 during the expansion, with the intent of benefitting from increased financial opportunities (Casteñeda 1996: 75). At the dedication of the new roads, Puerto gave his congratulations to the workers in Maya, addressing their connection to the ancient site, and confirming that the new infrastructure would benefit the local community, who deserved the effort as much as larger cities (Horcastidas 2008: 179-180). Puerto's address was in part a political statement, but also acknowledged the closely-held heritage of the local population, the shared connection to the architecture and, importantly, the proposed accessibility of the site for both the locals and outside communities. Puerto's intent was to not only open up Maya Yucatán to the rest of the country, but to also give the local population access to the outside world, particularly the rest of Mexico. As Yucatán remained largely isolated with a predominantly Maya population, the rest of the country was more diverse (Eiss 2008). The move to increase infrastructure and accessibility was revolutionary in the 1920s and set a precedent for the continuing commercialization of the site and its resulting impact on the local population.

3. Architecture and Reconstruction

After finding the site in significant disrepair and being overtaken by the natural environment, archaeologists and organizers have spent the last century reconstructing and stabilizing a number of the buildings and plaza spaces in order to both preserve and interpret them, a concept that is a direct translation from what the Maya themselves did to preserve the structures in antiquity. The 1924 excavations as documented by Morley revealed that a number of existing buildings in Chichén Itzá complex had been repaired in antiquity to accommodate additional phases for some of the most prominent structures. Toward the end of occupation, Maya masons constructed extra walls between columns and used monumental sculpture and other pieces of carved *spolia* to provide buttressing, which seemingly prevented several roofs from falling in. While original to the Maya inhabitation, this was seen by excavating archaeologists as a violation of the integrity of the site as a religious artifact, since many of the stones were gathered from nearby religious structures to accomplish this in antiquity. Morley describes the expedited construction as being the work of "impious hands, forced, perchance, by dire necessity," and a "violation of

Figure 2. The so-called "Observatory" or "El Caracol" at Chichen Itza. Photo by author, 2007.

the Rattlesnake and Warrior Throne" (Morley 1925). As the practice of restoring buildings in such a way was prolific at the beginning of the regional decline, the ancient Maya in power seem to have felt that the practice was acceptable.

While ideologically appropriate to the time period in which the buildings were reconstructed, the early archaeological reaction to the changes applied to the "original" architecture reinforces more modern underlying debates in archaeology, namely whether to restore buildings back to a particular period of construction (often seen as a "Golden Age" of a site), or interpret the site in part through each of its phases. Each is rooted in a desire for authentic representation of place and artifact, and researchers and archaeologists can fall on both sides of the debate. Although Morley's account provides a dramatic interpretation of the ancient reconstruction process, it is nonetheless common in many ancient societies to both protect and reconstruct religious buildings in antiquity. What is sometimes seen modernly as a violation of cultural heritage practice, is instead commonplace for ancient societies, introducing an interesting discourse to the narrative of architecture and culture heritage –the role of reconstruction in interpretation. Reconstruction can be seen as creating an understandable architectural narrative for visitors, who may not recognize archaeological remains as significant, but will most likely understand and identify with a whole building (UNESCO 1972). But despite the increase in understanding for some, reconstruction in the archaeological world can sometimes be seen as a negative addition, specifically where stabilization or consolidation will suffice to protect the building for future generations.

As extensive reconstruction was common practice in the early to mid-19th century, a number of structures at Chichén Itzá were reconstructed or restored specifically for the purpose of tourism. Early ideas regarding the purpose of several buildings not only influenced the reconstruction process, but also the continued interpretation by visitors. One such examples is the so-called Observatory (**Fig. 2**), which was initially named for its domed roof and spiral staircase, reminiscent of the modern building typology and based on the knowledge that the Maya were prolific astronomers. As early as 1875, the structure was assumed to be used for tracking the night sky, as it was also positioned to correspond to cardinal directions (Aveni *et al.* 1975; Ricketson 1928). By assigning such a function during the initial excavation, the tra-

Figure 3. The Pyramid of Kukulcan at the edge of the Civic Precinct. Photo by author, 2007.

dition of the building as a celestial observatory perpetuated, and may have impacted decisions made during the restoration. When found, the structure had largely collapsed with a mound of dirt covering the majority of the tower, and restoration was undertaken to clear excess material and replace missing stones. The building was later referred to as El Caracol ("the snail"), for the same domed appearance.

The pyramid of Kukulcán (**Fig. 3**) has also been the subject of repeated study on practices in reconstruction, inspired by the same dramatic influence that drew Stephens and Catherwood to document it. The stepped pyramid was a focal point of the civic precinct at Chichén Itzá and significant to the discussion of restoration as part of cultural heritage practice, as it has gone through several stages of reconstruction in both modernity and antiquity. When it was discovered, the pyramid was immersed in local flora, but still visible above the plaza that surrounds it. It was originally excavated and cleared of material between 1922-25 and restored in the 1930s using the original blocks that had fallen following the decline of the site. Around the same time, researchers discovered that the surviving temple was not the first on the site, and that a previous pyramid and temple had occupied the same position (Willard 1941). Thompson (1970: 44) suggests that the pyramid of Kukulcán dates to the "*dz'emal*" period, when the diety Kukulcán/Quetzalcoatl came to importance in the area, and that the structure encases an earlier temple of unknown official date, but attributed to the "*noh emal"* period, which is characterized by Seibal and Ucanal invaders. This would suggest that the site remained sacred through multiple invasions, and that the later Tula population sought to introduce newer architectural traditions on the site, potentially as a visual demonstration of emerging new heritages.

With the changing cultural populations and reuse of or redesign of monuments, the Maya practiced constant architectural revision, redesigning or renovating important buildings to meet new trends or ideals where the location remained religiously significant. The progression of form, changing purpose of particular buildings to meet modern needs, and constant improvement practiced by the ancient Maya can be compared to modern cultural heritage practices (Abrams 1994). While the ancient changes to the site may be related to shifting ethnic populations, particularly the introduction of Kukulcán derived from Mexica deity Quetzalcoatl, it is clear that inhabitants adapted older structures to meet current needs, reinterpreting when necessary (Jansen 2010: 89). The ancient Maya had a prominent interest in the past, illustrated through their tracking and recording of time, and the continuous use and

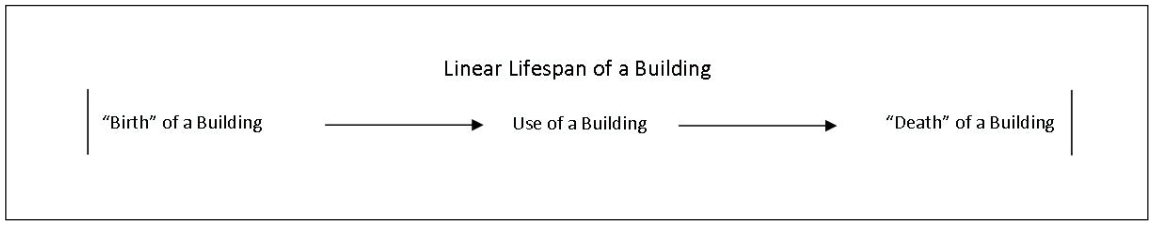

Figure 4. The traditional linear life of a building. Diagram by author, Figure 105 in Barry 2014.

reuse of older architectural structures (Farriss 1987). Although the use of built architecture saves labor and time, it was unnecessary for the Maya, who were able to construct substantial cities, suggesting the practice lies beyond mere convenience.

Architecture and its deterioration can be seen in part as a linear progression: a building is created, a building is used, a building deteriorates and "dies," with a clear beginning and end of life (**Fig. 4**). Weathering represents a building's presence through conflict, climate change, and abandonment. But through intervention, preservation, or restoration, a building can essentially be "reborn," and reused, continuing its lifecycle or beginning a new one post-intervention (Barry 2014). The creation of the new pyramid of Kukulcán over the previous temple emphasizes the importance of the site to the ancient Chichén Itzá community, demonstrating the need for continued preservation, while allowing for the modern focus to be a reminder of the past. The pyramid with new temple on top pays homage to the original temple on the site, referencing the sacredness of the area and its religious history. When reimagining this as part of the modern cultural heritage narrative, the 20th century restoration of the pyramid and adaptive reuse of the structure as an educational or interpretative tool helps to place the building back into a context of ancient cultural practice. What is seen as a negative impact on archaeology becomes culturally and contextually appropriate as part of the Chichén Itzá individual narrative.

While the pyramid is one of the most popular tourist attractions, it is only one of many at Chichén Itzá that may reference historical architecture at older sites. The Temple of the Warriors features architectural styles reminiscent of those used at Tula and Xochicalco, which original Chichén Itzá architects may have been referencing (Kowalski 1999: 102). In utilizing artistic practices from more ancient places, the architects at Chichén Itzá may have been establishing visual connections with more established and historical sites, intentionally placing Chichén Itzá within the longer visual timeline of Maya occupation in the area.

The ancient Maya viewed time as a series of cycles, each one following the previous, and used a series of calendars to chart time through the cycles. These included calendars to track a civic year (*Haab*) of 365 days, a religious year (*Tzolk'in*) of 260 days, and also the Long Count, which tracked time through a much longer series of cycles. The Long Count calendar consists of the *Tun* (360 days), the *Katun* (7200 days), and the *B'ak'tun* (144.000 days). One Long Count takes 13 *b'ak'tuns* and only occurs every 5.125.36 years (Milbrath 1999). The practice was culturally, yet inaccurately, popularized in the western world through the Maya *b'ak'tun* 13 apocalypse craze (Gelfer 2014; Restall and Solari 2011; Carlson 2011). Despite the perpetuation of the theory by conspiracy theorists, according to actual Maya practice and intentions, the equinox instead signaled restart of the calendar.

The Maya theology of cyclical time, however, is more influential when adapted to the interpretation of the site and used as a catalyst for architectural interpretation. "Reusing" the ancient architecture as a collection of traversable artifacts in the presentation of the site for archaeological tourism not only secures the continued existence of the buildings, but uses them as part of a new cycle of existence, breaking away from the typical linear architectural progression, and reinforcing the Maya notion of

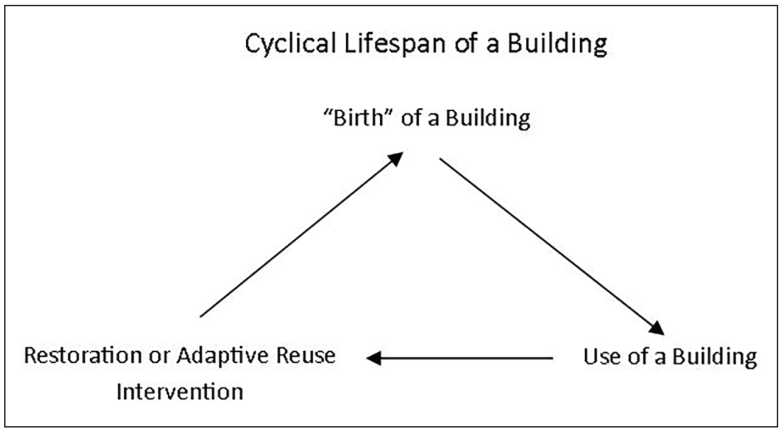

Figure 5. Cyclical life of a building based on Maya cyclical time theory. Diagram by author, Figure 106 in Barry 2014.

reuse within cyclical theory (**Fig. 5**). As Nancy Farriss suggests in her 1987 discourse, *Remembering the Future, Anticipating the Past*, "… time is a perpetual repetition, corresponding to the diurnal and seasonal rhythms of the natural world, and the past therefore is infinitely repeatable" (107). Referencing the cyclical understanding of the passage of time employed by the Maya and many other cultures, this passage is not provocative to cultural scholars, but can directly impact the concept of architectural progression. Through adaptive reuse and historic preservation, architecture begins to fall more within the process of a cyclical time, breaking away from a linear boundary, where it is left it to crumble until it is destroyed and demolished or completely replaced.

4. Adaptive Reuse and Archaeological Tourism

There are potential outstanding and significant concerns to a structure's continuing life as part of the tourism industry. Like many Maya archaeological sites in the Yucatán, visitors were originally allowed to climb the pyramid of Kukulcán to visualize the complete site from a bird's eye perspective and visit the interior room on the top. As a result of stricter concerns regarding both the safety of visitors and importantly, the monument, the Mexican National Institute of Anthropology and History closed the pyramid and interior room to climbers in 2006, leaving the pyramid in a stable position as part of the civic precinct. In a further interpretation comparison to Maya practice, those permitted in the temple at the top are now a restricted few, which parallels the limited access when the room was used as a temple.

Of similar concern to archaeological heritage planners is overtourism of the site, as Yucatán accommodates larger and larger groups in the area. Chichén Itzá is one of the most popular tourism destinations in Yucatán, regularly accommodating substantial groups from the local cruise industry. The site provided 50-55 percent of all tourism to archaeological sites or zones in Yucatán between 1977-87, and is currently "Mexico's second most-visited archaeological site (Chichen Itza 2015). CULTUR, the Patronato de las Unidades de Servicios Culturales y Turísticos del Estado de Yucatán, estimated income from the site at about $523,075 for 1988, and in 2006, 33% of national revenue in Mexico was generated by Chichén Itzá similar tourism ventures (Hawn and Tison 2015; Castañeda 1996: 80-1). While many Mexican archaeological sites remain closed to the public, largely as a result of the expense of public interpretation, 173 are accessible to the public and revenue generated from these contributes to national and regional archaeological efforts (Vega 2002: 62). With limited archaeological resources interpreted for the public, and increasing publicity for the ones that are, visitor numbers will continue to increase at popular and available sites, which are convenient

Figure 6. Cleared plaza as part of the Chichen Itza interpretation. Photo by author, 2007.

to cruise ship and leisure vacation hubs. As a planned stop from several companies, tourism of Chichén Itzá is carefully planned to accommodate as many visitors as possible, increasing revenue, but also the potential for intentional or unintentional site destruction as a result of increased crowding (Castañeda 1996: 226). In 2004, the cost to enter the site was approximately $10, and this has increased to 232 pesos ($13) for foreigners and 154 pesos ($8.65) for residents (Garza 2016). Compared with other world archaeological sites, the entrance fee remains relatively low, and presumably partially contributes to the upkeep the of architecture, while other funds were generated by concessions (Ardren 2004: 105). The entrance fees to the site have also been subject to scrutiny, as non-cooperation between government entities has at times required the purchase of two separate tickets to enter the site (Evans 2004: 324).

Although an increase in visitor numbers could prove to help the site remain finantially viable, overcrowding, overgrooming, and control of resources away from the local population are potential issues that have resulted from similar tourism situations (Andereck *et al.* 2005). Overcrowding at the site may lead to a less than optimal tourism experience for visitors and similar overcrowing in the local area during peak seasons may cause heritage residents to abandon the area in search of a quieter life. Larger groups can also cause damage to architecture or artifacts from overexposure and excessive human contact. While the overgrooming (the excessive control of surrounding landscapes) of some archaeological sites is seen as an inauthentic representation of the local environment, the ancient Maya themselves practiced the grooming of the landscape around Chichén Itzá in favor of extensive public plazas and monumental architecture (**Fig. 6**), suggesting that the return of the site to a well-groomed and controlled space may relate ideologically to Maya practice.

Clearing space not only around the archaeological site but within it to accommodate increasing tourism is another controversial issue in the cultural heritage narrative, and has a lengthy history of practice in South and Central America, particularly surrounding the most famous archaeological sites, such as Machu Picchu, Peru (Larson and Poudyal 2012: 921). The Chichén Itzá plazas within the site, however, are preexisting and part of the ancient architectural make-up of the site, purposefully constructed to accommodate large crowds, so their restoration is in line with creating a contextual environment in which to view the other architectural remains. The plazas allowed for prime view of the architecture; clearing the jungle foliage from the buildings would not only contribute to their future preservation, but also not allow visitors to see the monuments as the ancient inhabitants originally intended. As with the restoration of the pyramid, what is marketed as incorrect practice in other areas is ideologically authentic and appropriate for Maya remains. Completely stripping the jungle back could be contrary to current heritage management and interpretation practices, as the complete removal of these elements does not allow for the full history of the site to be explored, particularly its near-abandonment and recession into the local jungle. Visitors may come away from the experience with the impression that this phase of the site never existed, or that the landscape naturally developed in that way, creating a discrepancy between the actual history of the site and that which is presented. As the area has evolved, the region has promoted ecotourism related to the Maya Forest, an area at the border of Guatemala, Beliza, and Mexico which purports to interpret forest landscapes integral to the sustainability of the ancient Maya (Ford 2006). The industry provides an additional economic benefit for remote

villages outside of the Chichén Itzá developed areas and relies on the perpetuation of the jungle (Hearne and Santos 2005: 303). Should the major tourism hubs like Chichén Itzá continue to expand into the surround reason, the Maya Forest and other ecotourism locations could be threatened.

5. Marketing the Maya: Architecture and Iconography

With Chichén Itzá's continued tourism expansion, these concerns have continued to increase exponentially as infrastructure, promotion, and popularity have grown. As renuve has increased so has the marketing of the archaeological landscape, which highlights the extensive architectural traditions and symbolic imagery available at the site. These qualities of architecture and space have traditionally been important to the understanding of the Maya, and in ancient Mesoamerican society, buildings were used as "public symbols" and illustrated purposeful narratives for both local and foreign populations (Kowalski 1999: 7). Architecture was considered part an outward expression of the identity of the population, because intricacies of design by region and other formal qualities demonstrated particularly important aspects of living and worshipping (Hutson 2010). While Chichén Itzá was at the height of its power, producing architecture so extensively would have also publicized the ability of the ruling power to complete large-scale endeavors while representing cultural/social/religious/political influences for the area at the time of construction. The pyramid of Kukulcán is one example of this trend, representing the introduction of the cult of Quetzalcoatl—later revised as Maya deity Kukulcán—and exemplifying various construction traditions. The architectural narrative was therefore culturally readable and in effect, controllable. Any individual who commissioned monuments could use them to propagate ideas to the rest of the society. Plazas, similarly, were used to display public ritual and provide images of important rulers (Sanchez 2005: 262; Andrews 1975: 10-13, 37). The built environment represented an important link between the past and present, as these icons contributed to a larger iconography that was readable to the Maya. The Plumed Serpent, for example, represented Quetzalcoatl/Kukulcán, and the pyramidal temple form was associated with the religious site at Xochicalco in Central Mexico (Molina and Kowalski 1999: 141-51). The association produced by the specific use of symbols created an architectural taxonomy of belief systems and influences, which allowed those in power to communicate with the local and greater community.

Just as architecture was used in the past to represent wealth, prosperity, and culture, it is reused today as part of interpretation in an effort to understand and communicate with different populations. As with reading the ancient architecture for influences, the interventions designed for the site can also provide insight into the ancient and modern Maya cultures, particularly for the purpose of tourism. The most represented iconographic symbol at modern Chichén Itzá is the pyramid of Kukulcán, which has become one of the most recognizable structures in the world, and therefore one of the most marketed for tourism purposes. The use of the pyramid as a tool of promotion has increased the site's iconographic status through the distribution of imagery and the creation of new associated art related to the recognizable form.

Archaeological photography, designed graphics, and other forms of representation have become integral to archaeological tourism marketing, helping to promote certain features at sites, while at the same time increasing the iconographic status of individual monuments through representation. The pyramid of Kukulcán is one of the most reproduced images associated with the site, and was featured on the 1000 peso bill in the 1970s, a sign of its national influence and importance as part of greater Mexican heritage identity.

Photography theory and its impact of sociological response provide a theoretical framework for the constant reproduction of particular images. Tourists tend to photograph both recognizable images and things that they visually understand; whole buildings, repeated artwork, etc. The pyramid is a form that is both recognizable and, following reconstruction,

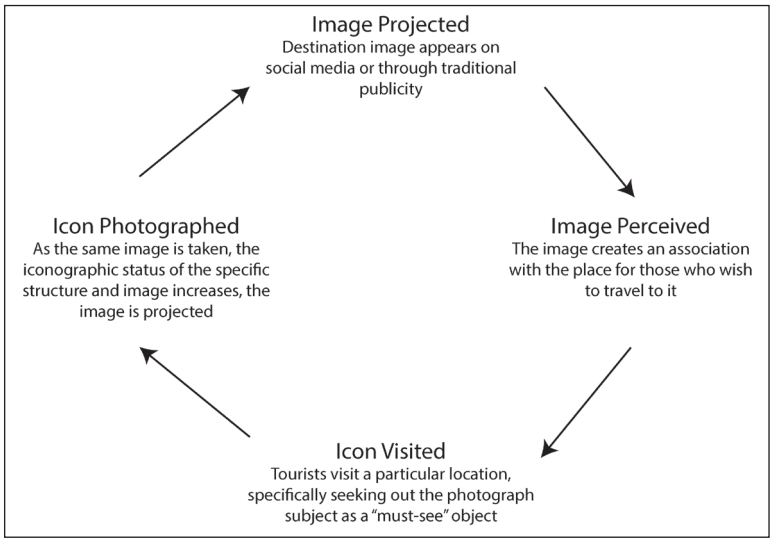

Figure 7. Interpretation of Jenkins' "Cycle of Representation." Diagram by author, 2016.

whole, making it more easily understood and remembered for the average visitor. Its placement as the edge of an extensive plaza allows the viewer to walk around the structure and photograph it from multiple angles in full view, making it, compositionally, an easily-captured moment. As technology has advanced to digital file distribution and social media sharing of imagery, tourist photographs are more easily distributed around the world, perpetuating the images, and therefore pyramid, as must-see moments at Chichén Itzá (Barry 2014).

Susan Sontag's (1977) seminal photography treatise introduces the photograph as an object of acquisition, where the object being photographed becomes part of the collection through the act of photography. If we consider that photographs can be seen as physical representations of place, their popularity and inexpense makes them ideal souvenirs of world travel, where the goal is to acquire and enhance an overall collection. With tourism images deemed to be "iconic," featuring a repeated image or repeated composition, or images of architecture or art that are seen prior to travel, specific monuments may be sought by travelers for the sole purpose of retaking specific images. Olivia Jenkins' (2003: 308) reworking of Stuart Hall's (1997: 1) "Cycle of Representation" (**Fig. 7**) captures this phenomenon, illustrating how tourism destination images are often seen in advance, leaving the particular moment to be perpetuated by later tourists rather than, engaging with the monument itself. As one of the most widely distributed images, pyramid of Kukulcán becomes iconic through modern visualization, giving yet another dimension to its fame, and another theoretical life cycle of its existence.

Chichén Itzá has also become an integral part of the modern visual identity of the widespread Maya culture through the commercialism of the structures and images associated with the site. "Identity," however, is controversial term, and was largely overused in the 1980s as part of tourism practice resutling in a further lost of meaning (Lanfant 1995: 30). Identity can be imposed, associated with, understood, or acknowledged as part of heritage—it is how people choose to define themselves either in part or whole. "Visual identity" can be understood as specific imagery traditionally associated with a particular place or group of people. While this identity can be driven by heritage groups, it can also be imposed by the outside world, as images are stripped of their meaning and put into a false context as related to a particular population. Visual identity is created by marketing campaigns, national governments, tourism developers, or any organization with a stake in the presentation of the site to a wide and public audience (Ascher 1984). As a visual asso-

Figure 8. Promotional poster for 2010 Elton John concert at Chichen Itza. Image source: www.chichenitza.com/

ciation grows, an unspecialized international public can create a subconcious or concious connection with that type of visual culture and begin to identify the local population through it. In a way, it continues the development of the place-based heritage through outside association, but could create a dishonest connection to authentic history.

In 2010, an Elton John concent held at the site was promoted through graphics depicting Elton John sitting on top of the pyramid of Kukulcán (**Fig. 8**). While the concert series itself was the subject of protest by Mexican archaeologists, the graphic was posted to the Chichén Itzá website and ultimately proceeded (O'Conner 2012). Mel Gibson's 2006 blockbuster *Apocalypto* (Touchstone Pictures) also visually referenced the pyramid, or an almost-identitical example, on promotional graphics that were internationally distributed (**Fig. 9**). Each popularized a specific aspect of the Maya culture for promotional purposes using a piece of internationally recognizable architecture. A *Washington Post* editorial, which interviewed Maya scholars regarding *Apocalypto*, suggested that while there was some accuracy to the film, particularly the use of Yucatec Maya spoken by local actors, most scholars were concerned with the stripping down of cultural intricacies to a diluted telling of the more dramatic aspects of Maya life (Booth 2006). Their concern was not just about the commidification of history,

Figure 9. *Apocalypto* promotional poster released by Touchstone Pictures (2006). The poster specifically features the pyramid of Kukulcán and two other pyramids as a backdrop.

which has its own history related to film, but in what the living Maya would think of the representation of their heritage in such a way. As historical films traditionally lack living memory descendant, this is a relatively uncommon problem, but the local Yucatán Maya are still significantly invested in their own heritage and history, and may not appreciate an outsider's mainstream interpretation of it.

The widespread use of specific Chichén Itzá iconography in promotional materials has helped to increase international awareness of the site and even some knowledge of what exists there, but is developing a visual identity through image associations for the place and imposing a new hybrid and distinct heritage on the Maya population and its descendants. This type of image association overstates and overshadows the historical significance of particular

Figure 10. Maya worker standing with sculptural artifact. Photo from Carnegie Institution (Morley 1925: 86).

structures by suggesting an inflated importance of a few quintessential monuments in order to accommodate mass appeal. Although archaeological investigation has revealed that the pyramid of Kukulcán was of relative importance to the city, it has become the most identifiable structure associated with the site, which serves to recreate its own historical discourse.

6. Chichén Itzá and Stakeholder Involvement

The imposition of visual and associated heritage on the modern Maya population begins essentially with the excavation itself. Morley's articles on the subject gave modern readers a visual and written narrative, with the intention of representing not only the excavation and discoveries, but also the local Maya descedants. As a non-local writer, Morley's descriptions of the local population are often dismissive, and at times deragatory. Under a photo of a local Maya man in traditional dress standing as a scale figure next to an detailed architectural sculpture excavated from the site (**Fig. 10**), Morley writes:

> Two hundred thousand Maya toil for foreign masters to-day in the henequen fields of Yucatan, all memory of their former magnificence gone as completely as if it had never been. Their wants are few and easily filled…But, with such a glorious past, it would seem as though his future might be made of even greater promise than this. With rough places in the road, he must travel from his own simple past to the complicated world of to-day, and there is ever reason to expect that he may again fashion for himself a destiny worthy of his splendid ancestry (1925: 86).

While Morley's impressive regard for the site's past does not extend to the present population, this and similar passages connect the two through his assumptions about their heritage. Although written almost 100 years ago, which accounts for some of the cultural dismissiveness and bais, his evidence for the decline of the ancient Maya civilization and turmoil of the modern population is still purely visual—based on architecture still standing and artifacts uncovered. He uses these tools as a comparison to what is seen around him, and uses the lack of congruency to condemn the modern Maya. Essentially, Morley imposes a heritage upon Chichén Itzá's regional descendants, suggesting that the modern heritage that they are producing is insufficient in comparison to the greatness of the past.

When Morley was writing, this was a perfectly acceptable view of both the ancient and modern worlds, driven by the archaeology of the elite, but suggests that even in the early 20th century, ancient and modern architecture was influential to the outside interpertation of place, and the imposition of heritage on populations. The small huts of the modern Maya in 1925 were more than likely very similar to the huts of the ancient Maya population at the height of Chichén Itzá, yet they did not live up to what Morley established as an acceptable standard when compared to the ancient remains that he was experiencing, specifically a site that was meant to impress through architecture. As was practice in the 19th and early 20th centuries, large-scale buildings and "treasures" were proof of a civilization's magnifiscence and worth, putting a monetary value on archaeological remains. While this has largely fallen out of practice today, even modern in-

terpretation can occasionally betray a similar bias, where the culture that outsiders deem as important is emphasized and the heritage of the modern population is ignored. Archaeology is not "agenda free," particularly in reference to identity imposition; as Meskell (2002: 293) writes, "What sets archaeology apart from other disciplines seeking to represent the nation or culture, such as history or anthropology, is its materiality. The residues of the past are often monumentalized and inescapable in daily life. Individually, the past is memory—collectively, it is history." Those curating the collection are able to shape history, whether intentioned or not, and can skew visitor understanding of both the past and the present.

While Morley's article exposes the bias during one period of excavation, the local population and national government have had a substantial impact on the presentation of the site since. Maya descendants still live and thrive in the area, but their influence on the management of the site has been described in opposing ways. Ancient Chichén Itzá can still be considered within memory of the modern Maya population, with stories or traditions passed down through multiple generations. Many of the descendants continue to live with an understanding of ancient cultural beliefs and can inform heritage management specialists on authentic or inauthentic representations (Nygard and Wren 2008). While local stakeholder involvement is integral to the successful execution of archaeological interpretation, it is rarely practiced in an effective way, particularly where cultural traditions are no longer within living memory of the local population. According to a 2006 study, 10% of people in Latin America identified as one of many indigenous cultures (Hall and Patrinos 2006). As tourism to Chichén Itzá has had a substantial impact on local communities, their professional involvement both as excavators and guards is one way to engage the community further in the site. Maya workers have been hired by the National Institute of Anthropology and History and trained for generations to guard the site, with their positions inherited by family members upon their death, suggesting a continuing tradition of local work to ensure that a feeling of ownership is passed on to future generations (Breglia 2005). The modern population sees the traditions of the past as culturally important to their evolving heritage, a concept that is necessary to the continued use of the site and therefore the continued economic development.

Allowing artists to and local craftspeople to vend is another method that would engage the community in the preservation of the material, and also bolster the local economy. Artists have historically sold their creations to tourists within the boundaries of the architectural complex, and are known for creating a new type of Yucatán art that has evolved alongside the archaeological tourism in the area (Castañeda 2005). Some arts and crafts sold as souvenirs use recognizable imagery from the archaeological site as inspiration in their creations (**Fig. 11**). Local craftspeople, however, have not always been granted permission for selling wares within the site. When the tourism facilities were improved in 1996, local craftspeople were removed from the site, and concessions granted to other entities. After protests by the local population a temporary settlement was reached until 2003, when the vendors were again evicted. This prompted the Pisté population of vendors to retain legal council, who successfully negotiated a truce with the owner, which allowed the continued sale of souvenirs at the periphery of the ruins. Protests continued through 2010, including during the previously-mentioned Elton John concert at the ruins, where the discourse centered not just on vending rights, but specifically on the government and private owner's ability to limit access to a culture site (Hawn and Tison 2015: 241).

The lack of community engagement between the site and local populations introduces a number of controversial principles, including an individual's right to access heritage remains and the value of heritage land. Even under negotiated terms, the demand for rented vending spaces caused a rise in rental cost, forcing some independent local vendors out in favor of workshops located outside of Yucatán. (Castañeda and Himpele 1997; Ardren 2004). While tourism promotes economic development year round, particularly from cruise ship itineraries, the sitedemonstrates a history of local gentrification, pricing out many of the community

Figure 11. Souvenirs sold at Chichen Itza makeshift market, 2007-2014. Photo by author, 2016.

craftspeople and workers who may not afford to remain in the area. As long as tourists are visiting Chichén Itzá, the local population will be able to sell crafts and feed visitors, but under increasingly constricted circumstances, potentially driving the business away from descendant populations.

Although many of the Maya residents working at or around the site may not have strict ancestral ties to the ancient complex, the connection forged through generational work, art production for tourism, and heritage associations may help to establish a feeling of patrimony over the archaeology, and therefore propagate protect of the remains (Breglia 2005). Cultural heritage studies have addressed the importance of local support and stakeholder involvement in the success of heritage sites, emphasizing the benefits of a sense of personal of group ownership over historical remains, which may encourage preservation (McManamon and Hatton 2000).

7. Political and Commercial Influence in Yucatán

While Yucatán is able to encourage some local participation in the upkeep of the monuments, there is still significant exploitation of the population and archaeological remains by the national government. The connection between political power and architecture is ever present in the study on ancient cultures, and often architectural planning and construction becomes the visual and aesthetic representation of political legitimacy as economies are impacted by tourism. Often being used to express control over a local population, these nationally established heritage spaces also impose a local identity. Chichén Itzá, demonstrates significant parallels associated with the narrative of architectural identity, and political control stretches from the emergence of the city in the 8th century to its establishment as a modern tourism destination. The site was established as UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1988, and declared one of the modern Seven Wonders of the Ancient World in 2007, making it more popular than ever, receiving on average 1.2 million visitors per year (Milman 2015). With few jobs not directly related to the site, and the associated jobs inherited or under the control of the excavating body, the only solution for many is to sell art or crafts at the site when allowed, a profession that can be considered unstable long-term and relies heavily on tourism trends and cost and availability of vending space. As the makeshift bazaar along the tourist path has grown, and more tourists are being accommodated with rising numbers, both have started to encroach on the archaeological site opening the ruins up to likely damage. Although increasing visitor numbers means increasing revenue from the site, that money is not necessarily seen by the local population, who must continue to rely on other tourism-related work for income.

The commercialization of the site and specifically the pyramid of Kukulcán by the government also weighs heavily on the authentic-

ity of the presentation and causes concern for the continued survival of the site. The use of the pyramid and surrounding architecture as part of an interactive sound and light show (installed between 1979-80) in the evening encourages visitors to stay longer in the day, but at the same times makes a mockery of the religious tradition that the pyramid once represented, and those voices advocating for education in all interpretive entities (Acosta 2013). Now, instead of standing as a beacon to religious belief, it exemplifies and precedents the commercialization of archaeology for tourism income. Commercializing cultural heritage sites often does not allow for an accurate portrayal of the past, thus risking the interpretation of a shared heritage where a descendent population still resides. In continuing to increase revenue exponentially, the tourism industry in Yucatán is at risk of creating a power vaccuum centered at Chichén Itzá through commercialization, with apt parallels to the collapse of the ancient city (Sweitz 2012). As the power and influence of one particular site grows, other sites may see less funding and attention, and be left to deteriorate.

Tourism is often representative of important economic growth, but when left unchecked can cause more harm than good to developing and even developed economies (Meethan 2001). Overtourism at Machu Picchu forced the national government to strictly cut down on the number of tourists entering the site per day, and also limited vending on the site to protect the ruins from human-caused destruction (Larson and Poudyal 2012). The limit is now capped at about 2500 visitors per day as part of a solution for the sustainable development of the site. This came after the construction of significant tourism infrastructure on the small site, including a fully operational hotel. For Machu Picchu, the intervention came following an outcry over damage to the site, and provides an important precedent for Yucatán. Yet beyond the closing of the pyramid of Kukulcán to climbers, and no longer allowing tourists to sit on the Chac Mool sculpture, the local and national governments have yet to limit visitor activities at Chichén Itzá, which could see damage similar to that of Machu Picchu is tourism continues to grow. Despite these concerns, most locals of Mexican tourism locations interviewed in a 2015 study reported that "tourism had been beneficial," suggesting that the thought of economic gain outweighs the preservation of the heritage (Hawn and Tison 2015: 245).

The world may acknowledge the cultural significance of Chichén Itzá, but its tourism presentation, commercialized monuments, and modern political associations tell an expanded story of heritage interpretation through an understanding of artistic and architectural traditions. Chichén Itzá is a case study in the influence of architectural interventions on tourism understanding, and how to address heritage alongside a descendant population. The interventions are reflective of the ancient civilization and particularly its use of architectural monuments to demonstrate ideas of culture, politics, and control.

As one of the most popular tourism destinations in the world, largely perpetuated by the commercialization of the site, Chichén Itzá has progressed into a new metaphorical cycle of existence, as a symbol of Maya cultural heritage and identity. Here, architecture serves as a tool of regeneration through historic preservation, allowing crumbling buildings to once again demonstrate political and social concepts to a widespread audience. But with tourism numbers increasing and monuments still facing deterioration, the questions remains whether Chichén Itzá will survive to see its next cycle or once again collapse into the jungle.

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