Panayota Malkogeorgou

Hinemihi: Visitor reaction to Hinemihi

CLANDON HOUSE 10/06/2003-11/06/2003

'Ownership is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them'.
Walter Benjamin 1968[1]

Ownership and context

'A distinction between the spiritual ownership and the legal ownership of the Hinemihi has been the subject of repatriation claims in the past…the most effective way for the National Trust to maintain moral authority (to accompany the legality of ownership) is to encourage the continued involvement of the Maori community' (Sully 2003). This report is part of a more inclusive programme of collecting information and qualifying the parameters for evaluating a conservation project that acknowledges contextual as much as factual concerns regarding its preservation.

Part of assessing the significance of Hinemihi and associated values was a number of interviews conducted on the grounds of the Clandon Estate with National Trust visitors. The interviews took place on the 10th and 11th of June 2003. The aim of the interviews were set with the view to getting some qualitative information regarding the preservation of Hinemihi and the public's approach to it; to gain access to some of the concepts relating the condition of the Hinemihi to cultural values.

Relationship of condition to value

The more general process of contextualising Hinemihi involves conducting meetings and face to face individual interviews with people who have a stakeholder status as it is assessed by the National Trust and the Institute of Archaeology (UCL) as the main institutional bodies responsible for the overall conservation project in its concept and execution. Both the National Trust and the Institute of Archaeology conclude a concrete body of stakeholders together with the very active Maori community. From the stand point that the London Maori community has been quite vocal in the approach to what regards Hinemihi, it was believed, at the outset of this investigation, that perhaps similar concerns lie with the National Trust visitor.

The investigation and this report serves fundamentally as a first stage to getting an insight into the visitor's way of relating to the condition of the object and its perceived value. For this purpose the interviewees were encouraged to discuss issues of preservation and their connection to the property intellectual, sentimental or other

[1] Benjamin, W., (1968). 'Unpacking my library' is part of a collection of small essays written by Benjamin, W., edited by W. Benjamin and H. Ardent in *Illuminations*. New York: Random House

wise in a semi structured questionnaire. To get a better understanding of Hinemihi, in terms of the preservation of various aspects of the Maory house, and, in fact, its impact to the visitor as a whole.

Part of a whole?

Considerable effort was employed to focus the visitor to the one subject, which is the theme of this investigation; their reaction to the Maori House and how they view its preservation. Visitors would much rather talk about what they are interested in whether this is an idea, an object or something even completely irrelevant. *'Well there were a lot of exhibits about the owners time in New Zealand, Very interesting.', 'Is it wood?'.* Hinemihi, for the National Trust visitor, on this random search, does not seem to have any particular importance beyond that of an object to a collection; special only because of its size and because of its location in the garden.

Its connection with the rest of the property was invoked and it seemed to be the most important element for the visitors interviewed on that occasion.
'It is interesting, but I am particularly interested in the types of objects that are inside the house. Those are the tings I come to see; I mean it is interesting building, I have never been to New Zealand'.

The Maori House, although intriguing, did not seem to captivate anyone interviewed in that particular day in any significant way at all. The story of the family, the main house, the collection and the family's connection to New Zealand to the degree that this was associated with the British colonial past, or something completely irrelevant, where topics that were brought up by the public regardless the questions asked.
'One of the occupiers was governor of New Zealand, of course, and there are displays of New Zealand artifacts. Kiwis, that is New Zealand? We got that one right, and Prince Charles had something to do with it'. 'We are just visiting from Preston, where are you from?'.'Is this a model you said?'.

However, people were informed about the Maori House, although, in a general kind of a way: 'Is it a Maori House? Yes, it is a traditional Maori building. Was it built here?'. In fact, it seemed that different visitors had very similar ideas about Hinemihi. That it is a traditional and authentic Maori Meeting House, brought over from New Zealand, but not quite sure the of the state or condition in which it was brought or under what circumstances this has happened: '*Was it build over here, or was it brought over from New Zealand?'*.

Negotiating authenticity

Equally, when it came to questions regarding preservation the interviewees thought of Hinemihi within the same standards and approach as to the rest of the property. Since its importance seemed to be reduced to that of an additional object to a large collection of interesting and exotic objects, the significance of Hinemihi is understood -by the National Trust visitor- mainly with regard to the family whom originally owned it, or as it is frequently presumed, was given to. Its current owner, the National Trust figures quite significantly mainly in maters of access and preservation: *'I do not know, I mean to be perfectly honest I do not know what this should look like.*

Whatever a Maori think this is acceptable, if you know what I mean. I would like to see it kept up; maintained in reasonable condition probably, if this does not interfere with the continuances of the building. It should be kept, because it is an interesting building, and it shows the phases of British history. The Imperial period really I suppose, when the Empire…'

'I don't know how much of a gift it was given to him when he was a governor out there. Certainly, I think the original people should have a saying in these things'. The idea that 'original people' should/could be involved in the process of assessing intervention was not foreign and when asked visitors were happy to include a wider spectrum of stakeholders. This is also indicative of the overall approach to the concept of authenticity. Authenticity does not seem to be seen as something fixed or concrete, but rather as a concept open to negotiation. The idea of an authentic object and authenticity in general, was mostly brought up by the interviewees themselves, in some way or an other; and it was quickly made apparent that it is a very important issue. In particular, it came up in the discussion regarding the roof: *'Probably as it should be, or as it was, yes'. 'I guess have the roof representative of what it would normally have been'.* Driven by a concern to preserve what is understood as authentic, it was not unusual for interviewees to think of a minimal approach as positively good practice: *'It is fine as it is I do not think it needs more preservation'.*

And, interchangeably with the 'authentic' there was reference to the concept of the 'original' with regard to the object's conservation. Specifically the issues regarding the thatched roof connected with the visitor's attitude were hard to assess. This was not possible without some background information as the conditions were so complex that required further knowledge to make a fair judgment on the interviewees response. Because of the nature of the investigation it was not practical to assume that equal amount of information would be given to all interviewees as the interviews were based on a lose discussion. '*Well I think if there were small things inside it, would be nice to have something representative or something. So, I guess do you need to keep it closed, do you? Cause it is normally closed you cannot see inside it'*.

Sometimes there was surprise and perhaps a bit of confusion regarding the form and condition of parts of the Maori House: '*So this is not the authentic roof*?', '*It would be interesting if it was authentic.'*

Regardless the person, however, strong ideas about authenticity prevailed. Not a particular idea of authenticity but more a regard for whatever authentic might mean. The variety of the options regarding the restoration of the roof for example and the public's reaction to them is a clear indicator of the amount of a gray area that exists in relation to what constitutes the authentic and how to best preserve it.

'*Restore it to what it was. Definitely if you have to do something about, you would have to do what was originally. If you are going to have something from the other side of the world, you have to have it as it was'.*

'I presume if it is not cared for it is going to fall apart at some stage, but the way it looks at the moment is absolutely fine…well originally was wooden it seems wooden would be right then'.

Intellectual access and physical condition

In most cases, the visitors were satisfied with the way the Maori House is presented, both in terms of intellectual access, and in terms of its physical condition. This seem to be largely to the specificity of views of authenticity and original state which seem to surpass personal taste in hierarchical value however abstract they might be. *'It depends what the wooden roof looks like. Thatched roof looks fine but if it was wooden I would go for the wooden roof'*.

'No I think it looks nice as I t is, if this is an original Maori house it is always nice to have something in original. But then, I do not know anything about the people who put the house down here. What was the intention for putting it down there? For me it would not make much difference about the choice. If it would be wooden roof, or replace this one with the original, but better to put an original one'.

As something that none wished to contest and everyone acknowledged despite the fact that a lack of clarity as to what consists an original object and originality was evident. So even, if asked to make an aesthetic judgment, what seemed more like a moral one prevailed. The ambiguity of its preservation encourages ideas of nostalgia and associations with a desirable past, in an atmosphere of where the local mixes with the exotic, and from that point of view the current state of Hinemihi suffices.

'I do not know what they are like over there, the original would be?'

'I think it should be done the way it was originally. The original roof should be replicated, if they can do it. I mean what would they have used in New Zealand?'

It is not necessarily that the idea of what is original corresponds to one and the same thing among all interviewees, nevertheless, there is a strength of conviction regarding the importance of originality: *'Well it is a mater of whether they want to put it back to the original. They should bring it back to the original'.*

This nostalgia of lost forms and structure does not always necessarily extend to the materials used. This perhaps contradicts traditional and professional conservation values. Yet its importance needs to be acknowledged because, among the public interviewed what is perceived as original is a very flexible idea, wider implications may reflect contradictory values based on the different opinions of the stakeholders. *'Well if this is original, keep it as it is, by all means. – It has to be restored. Repaint the bits that need repainting but I think you should keep it as it is'.*

'Repaint the bits but do not upset it more than necessary. And the faces up there are warn evil spirits or something like that?'

'It looks very impressive thatched. You said this is not original? This looks very authentic, it is very nice'. At the same time authenticity was, taken -or mistaken(?)-, judged in any way, on aesthetic grounds, which indicates a connection between visual

appreciation and ethical values. This connection was also apparent regarding other elements of the Maori House, its condition and state of preservation as well as the way it is presented to the public. Part of the questionnaire touched on issues relevant to the garden as context of the Maori House.

Maori and Englishness

When asked if they would visit the estate again specifically to see Hinemihi a visitor answered: 'well it is nice that it is here but I would not come here particularly to see it. Yes, it is nice to have it here'. Even when its importance was emphasized by asking if a unique object such as a Maori Meeting House in a National Trust house has changed the visiting experience, the answer was plainly, no. And in fact an other group of visitors when asked if it was a surprise to find it in the grounds of an English country house responded with an impulsive, yet, cliché 'the English are eccentric. I am not surprised to find anything anyway, and we would not come here specifically to see it. No!'.

In some cases, the interviewee, perhaps under the impression that there was some hidden agenda behind the interview, other than what was declared - i.e. a group of conservation students from the Institute of Archaeology working on Hinemihi by documenting and assessing its fabric and condition – was quick to reply ' well it is unusual but I can't say I have strong views either way' to the question 'what do you think about it being here?'. And a couple asked if they 'find it special?', casually replied: 'We see it as heritage, it makes some impression, but we are just having a look around'.

Contrary to the London Maori community who see Hinemihi House in its own right the casual visitors of the National Trust see it only in terms of the whole estate and decidedly as part of British colonial history and wider dominance. It is the material staff that, for the interviewees, presents evidence of the English character and British history. A glamorous past pact full of strange objects, of people who eccentrically traveled, collected and impressed far away countries. In some cases, it was believed that those objects, and in particular Hinemihi, were tokens of contented locals who gave the Meeting House out of gratitude for the British involvement in the history of New Zealand.

'*So, do you think having it here adds to your visit?*
Oh yes it does! If you go around the house you see that Onslaw was a Governor of New Zealand, there is on display Maori made from feathers and some sort of grass and several Maori medallions and it says there on display that on the grounds is the house that he brought back…the house that I thought that was presented to him, but you say that it wasn't. You say he bought it. I thought it was given to him as a memento: so have this house.'.

A Maori Meeting House in the world

In the process of this investigation it was felt that it would be perhaps useful to stress the importance of the Maori House in relationship not only to Clandon Park and/or its original context, but also to the other Maori Houses outside New Zealand and register

the public's reaction to this information. Because it gave the interviewees an idea of Hinemihi's significance within a contemporary value system that they could easily relate to this bit of information seemed to have some impact. They all had visited places of cultural interest both/either in this country and abroad at some point. This information at the same time was not making any special demands on the interviewees background historical, philosophical, political, material or otherwise knowledge beyond a sense of belonging to a wider public. This bit of new knowledge regarding Hinemihi might give a slightly different edge to Hinemihi, but what exactly the information means to the visitor however, is not easy to quantify. The terminology used is vague and ambiguous and can signify different things for different stakeholders, being completely open to interpretation.

'We should make much more of it. It should be restored properly, cause it is not going to stay like this for very long. It looks damaged already. Oh well it is very unusual'.

Conclusion

The way the public connects with the Maori House in particular and the National Trust property in general, would help generate a more informed response regarding the significance of Hinemihi that is essential to the preservation approach, both in concept and in practice.

This report was put together in order to present the outcome of those interviews and the topics that were touched in the discussions with the visitors. The results of the interviews can be further tested and substantiated, by more thorough qualitative and a further quantitative research. These findings can serve to indicate the direction a current conservation project could take by eliminating as many assumptions and habits as possible, while creating a foundation for a more detailed research project It serves fundamentally as an insight into the visitor's way of relating to the condition of the object and its perceived value.

The National Trust visitor is interested in Hinemihi to the extend that that gives more information and material in order to relate to the rest of the property, their own identity and their concept of heritage. Hinemihi does not seem to signify more that any other part of the collection to the Western and unfamiliar with Maori or New Zealand culture visitor. The material state, ownership and preservation of the Hinemihi is inevitably viewed within this context. There are undoubtedly strong views on authenticity and originality of the object, and those are assumed as inherent in the heritage object. Because of the vagueness in the way those issues are perceived, both originality and authenticity seem to be open to discussion and negotiation. As far as any personal connection, stories, memories or any type of personal reference with regard to Hinemihi, was impossible to detect and seem quite unlikely.

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E.C.C.O European Confederation of Conservator-Restorers' Organisation, *Professional Guidlines* http://www.encore-edu.org/encore/documents/ecco3.html

IIC The International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works, *Code of Ethics and Guidance for Practice*, http://www.iiconservation.org/

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