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Reviewed Article:

Colonial Williamsburg: Archaeology, Interpretation & Phenomenology

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This paper stems from a keynote talk I was invited to give at the *Archaeology for the People: Exhibition, Experience and Performance* conference, in Kernave, Lithuania, in September of 2018. When I began investigating this conference I was unclear as to how well EXARC's focus on experimental archaeology would blend with International Museum Theatre Alliance (Imtal)'s approach of museum theatre and interpretation. They seem after all, two very different disciplines. It could be said that experimental archaeology is about hard science, or

at least scientific method–theory, experiment and conclusion, whereas Imtal's work in museum theatre is concerned with a different set of skills and methodologies–performance, cultivating emotional connection, and interpretation. In the following I suggest they may have more in common than might initially be thought.

> In this brief overview of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation I have shown that the museum has many ways in which it aligns with the goals of the Archaeology for the People conference–the ways and practices through which we can convey values of archaeological heritage to the public 'for the people'. Through the investigation, contextualization, and presentation of archaeological heritage, and interpretive museum theatre, both theoretical and practically we can explore what it is to visit the past at a museum.

In the scholarly world these two subjects make unlikely bedfellows. But the more I considered this, the more I could see that they are very much alike, essentially both examining the human experience–the phenomenology of experience, if you will–from different directions, although to similar ends. This also quickly connected for me conclusions I have made in my research of the past decade into 3D virtual technologies, where the virtual world is often seen as distinctly separate from the real one (Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, 2015; Inker, in press).

So how are these various approaches the same? While the virtual and real worlds are different, they are the same in the mind, in the sense that both space and story are experienced cognitively. I suggest they are all looking for the phenomenology of human experience, it is just the medium of expression that is different. While we can never truly experience the past, the different methodologies of archaeology, museum theatre, and virtual, all look at what was the cognitive human experience, and try to impart at least a trace of the past to our fellow humans through participation in similar behaviors, emotions, and experiences.

As a model of how these contrasting media can intersect, I will use my place of work, the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, as the example. While Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area has all these experiences: museum theatre, a lively experimental trades program, archaeological programs, and a 3D visualization program, the Foundation does not explicitly connect any of the programs to either each other, or to the concept of a phenomenological experience. In the following discussion I will deal with each of these elements in turn to demonstrate how archaeology and interpretation at Colonial Williamsburg began, has developed, and will continue to advance into the future. While not explicit, they can all be considered phenomenological in that they are in the moment, sensory and experiential. So, for me, it has been useful exercise to examine together, what are often seen as separate disciplines that do not align closely. By making this connection explicit,

perhaps we can help draw everyone into common cause; after all, to our visitors they present a single unified experience.

For 90 years the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation has been a living-history museum, in the terms of the title of the conference, *For the People*. This phrase is an echo of the first sentence of the preamble to the United States Constitution, "*We the people of the United States…*" which is a significant focus of Colonial Williamsburg's storytelling, mission and goals (U.S. Constitution. Preamble). Colonial Williamsburg is 'for the people' both in the sense that it is dedicated to telling the stories of America's birth, but also as a place of public history that encourages people to engage with their past. In reviewing Colonial Williamsburg's place as a US leader in the practice and presentation of archaeological heritage to the public, I propose that the method of this public engagement is in essence phenomenological.

Colonial Williamsburg began as a kernel of an idea in 1928, the 'Jazz Age', a period when America was beginning to discover its place in the world and redefining its history. During the 19th century the city of Williamsburg had become a back water, falling from its place as the capitol of Virginia, Britain's wealthiest and most populous colony in the New World. During the American Revolution (1775-1783 CE) its role as capital of the Virginia commonwealth moved to Richmond, leaving Williamsburg to stagnate, so that by the early 20th century Williamsburg had become a sleepy Virginia town.

This changed, when in 1928 the Reverend W.A.R. Goodwin encouraged the millionaire philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr. to visit one of the important 18th-century buildings of Williamsburg, the Ludwell Paradise House. Goodwin sparked Rockefeller's interest in the significant role Williamsburg had to play in the American Revolution and managed to get him to support the preservation and purchase of the building. This was to be the first of many such purchases and renovations, that eventually led to eighty-eight houses built in the 18th-century being protected, and ultimately an area of 200 hectares (301 acres) being turned over to heritage preservation–what was the whole of the 18th-century city of Williamsburg. Today, the project survives as Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area. Now we are America's largest open-air living history museum with a total of over 500 structures being restored or reconstructed. Still 'for the people' in a multitude of ways, over half a million visitors are welcomed each year by over 400 Colonial Williamsburg staff, with about 150 costumed interpretive staff onsite at any time. We encompass over twenty historic trades, over forty historic sites, and are open 9-5pm daily, 365 days of the year. We have an ongoing philosophy of active reconstruction and preservation of traditional trades and skills that range from metalworkers (founders, gunsmiths, silversmiths, tinsmiths, and blacksmiths), and woodworkers (carpenters, cabinetmakers, joiners, cooper, and wheelwrights) to other fabric workers (tailors, leatherworkers, weavers, wigmakers, shoemakers, and milliners).

Superficially all these programs could be considered to be demonstrative and passive, but underlying this, their nature as physical and experiential means that the visitor has the opportunity for agency, to learn not only the techniques and theory, but also to engage in the behaviors involved in these disciplines as well. In a way, when they take part in an activity they are experiencing what it is like to be an archaeologist, craft worker or an architectural historian. Thereby they are phenomenologically 'being' the archaeologist for a time, much like those who engage in acting a part in museum theatre, or manufacturing a tool in experimental archaeology, are actively 'being' the person enacting the event (See Figure 1).

I propose that this is rightly termed a phenomenological experience. Phenomenology is part of a philosophical movement started in the early 20th century by Edmund Husserl who proposed that "*pure phenomenology is the science of pure consciousness*" (Moran and Mooney, 2002, p.129). In the realm of philosophical studies this approach has been expanded upon since, fundamentally attempting to distinguish between mental and physical phenomena. Today the popular phrase mindfulness, which comes out of eastern traditions, could be said to be an attempt more popularly describe the same type of human experience of living 'in the moment.' Phenomenology became prominent within the wider archaeological dialogue in 1994 with Christopher Tilley's 'a phenomenology of landscape' (Tilley, 1994). Tilley later summed up his approach detailing "*From a phenomenological perspective, knowledge of landscapes, either past or present, is gained through perceptual experience of them from the point of view of the subject*" (Tilley, 2010, p.25). The phenomenology of landscape began a new way of understanding how humans in the past behaved, although it focused mainly on early histories, predominantly within pre-historic landscapes.

We might begin to examine whether this technique could be usefully applied in the examination of other past human experiences, in addition to landscapes. A more recent definition of phenomenology in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy describes it as "*…the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view*" (Smith, 2018). This returns us to a more cognitive approach to the subject. Timothy Darvill took this approach to phenomenology in archaeology stating that phenomenology is "*…a set of theoretical approaches through which attempts are made to understand the way in which people experience the world they create and inhabit; the study of human experience and consciousness in everyday life from a first- person perspective*" (Darvill, 2008). He went on to emphasize the revelatory character of the experience, noting that it is "*…based on the recognition that people inevitably encounter the world through the medium of their own body. In this way phenomenological investigation…involved a process of letting things reveal themselves by experiencing or re-experiencing movements through a site or landscape.*" If phenomenology is human understanding as revealed though first-hand experience, then it may be that this is what happens when an individual participates in an activity that mimics past activities (such as in experimental archaeology), or emotionally connects with themes and emotions that mimic those of past people through theatre. While they are not actually

living in the past, or recreating a moment of the past, they are perceiving behaviors that can help create a connection to the past. With this proposition in mind we can go on to look at how this works in practice.

Since 2015 major changes have taken place at Colonial Williamsburg which have significantly changed the directions of both archaeology and interpretation. Over the past few years we have worked very closely with the National Association for Interpretation (NAI), a professional organization dedicated to advancing the profession of heritage interpretation, currently serving about 7,000 members in the United States, Canada, and over thirty other nations. Using the theories of interpretation originally set out by Freeman Tilden (2007), today, every frontline employee has been trained to NAI standards, as well as some of our other support staff who have direct responsibility for developing programming and interpretation. The plan has been to ensure a high level of training and a superior level of interpretation and museum theatre (See Figure 2). We do not shy from challenging histories and have a commitment to telling every story, especially those with great significance. Fundamentally we seek to engage people of the modern world with the narratives of those of the past, and we do this by asking questions that are of relevance today, then answering them in an 18th-century context.

At present a quick glance at any news source shows the American character is still contested, and we can recognize that some of the questions being asked are the same as those in the past. Americans are constantly seeking to define themselves and deal with the buried controversies of the past. One example of how we did this at Colonial Williamsburg was a program entitled Publick Times the reconstruction of an 18th-century estate sale, which included not only the sale of land, but also of enslaved men and women. This program created great debate when it was enacted in 1994, the one and only time it was run (Krutko, 2003).

Such sensitive and traumatic issues like slavery brought to light the underlying dissatisfaction with race-relations in modern America, and still align with much of current political debate surrounding American values of equality and freedom. Currently, we are still at the forefront of discussing moral dilemmas and their modern social implications in a museum context. For instance, Colonial Williamsburg has recently developed a website along with UNESCO to provide an opportunity to connect more than fifty museums and sites that remember "*transatlantic slavery, slave trading, and their legacies*" (Slavery and Remembrance, 2018). Following on from *Publick Times*, a more recent and innovative Colonial Williamsburg program called *Journey to redemption–telling the story of enslaved people* provides a neutral forum for visitors to debate not only slavery but how it is represented. The production was devised theatre, collaboratively developed to tell stories about the personal lives of enslaved and slave owners, and told from an 18th-century perspective. As it progresses the piece begins to transform, with the actors, now out of character, giving their personal experiences and anecdotes on what it is like to portray the enslaved or slave owners from a modern

perspective. This discussion mixes light and heavy themes, culminating in an end of production audience discussion to debate and explore the values portrayed onstage. The program is typified by movement and imagery that uncovers the humanity of the enslaved and develops the interpretation of slavery in an honest way, but throughout puts the viewer in the minds of the participants–both in the past and in the present.

Turning to the archaeology, American historical archaeology could be considered to have begun at Colonial Williamsburg, and it is presented to the public in a multitude of ways. Fundamentally, archaeology is contextualized through the preservation of eighty-eight 18th-century buildings in situ, and the reconstructed remains of hundreds more archaeologically recovered structures. Along with the preservation of traditional trade skills and active reconstruction and experimentation with historic and archaeological sources, visitors encounter archaeology through daily demonstrations of hands-on experimental and historically accurate manufacturing in our trade shops. These shops are situated in their same locations as their 18th-century forerunners. Archaeology is practically experienced via on-going excavation and research programs, annual undergraduate field schools, and daily interactive excavations for children. More theoretical archaeology is developed through digital reconstruction, educational outreach, and in our archaeology and conservation lab, which holds one of the world's largest 18th-century research collections (over 60 million items).

In the past Colonial Williamsburg has gone through three broad phases of archaeology (as outlined by Poole, 2014). The first phase was typified by cross trenching and lasted for thirty years from 1928 to 1958. Jimmy Knight was the principal proponent of this technique typical in the field at the time. Guided by a map of the city from 1781, the so-called Frenchman's map, and eighty-eight still-standing buildings, an attempt was made to discover the remaining foundations of buildings and thereby reconstruct the physical character of the city. Little interest was devoted to broken artifacts or stratigraphy as over five hundred foundations were uncovered and reconstructed. Trenches were dug a shovel wide and five feet apart, initially at ninety degrees to the street, the technique later changing to forty-five degrees angle to the street. In this way, over seventy-five percent of the city's historic area was uncovered. By the late 1950's archaeological techniques had moved on, and accordingly Colonial Williamsburg's archaeological approach moved into its second phase, that of open area excavation. This technique was personified by Ivor Noel Hume, and its stratigraphic approach excavating ten feet squares with baulks, allowed for the first detailed feature recording and study. Emphasis was given to artifact recovery and analysis within stratigraphic context, allowing closer dating to be developed and a connection to the wealth of historic sources on occupation and events at the site. This was a period when archaeology first began to be popularized as it caught the public's imagination. The third, and current phase of archaeology began in the 1980s. The technique of open area excavation was used, with more focus on theoretical hypotheses for excavation rather than simply data recovery as an

illustrative tool. Emphasis today is given to conservation, research questions, and soil testing, and has gone on to develop many new archaeological disciplines such as: archaeology of the enslaved, landscape archaeology, and archaeological 'foodways'. Multidisciplinary techniques are used such as anthropological comparative approaches, quantitative analysis, resistivity, as well as the use of computer reconstruction for representation and experimentation, and technological outreach through webcams, blogs, and social media.

The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation promotes the activities of experimental and active archaeology through a variety of participatory methods. On-going research excavations and artifact study are supported by an annual influx of students from the College of William and Mary, and we have recently partnered with EXARC to support a Fellowship in experimental archaeology. Younger audiences are encouraged to take part in the cultural-educational camp for school pupils, *DIG! Kids, Dirt & Discovery*, and its companion program *DUG! The Cleaner Side of Archaeology. DIG!* sessions are fifty-five minute-long for ages five to sixteen years, where children can be exposed for the first time to archaeology, through excavation techniques, artifact screening, and simple archaeological theory and process. *DIG!*'s companion program *DUG!* is a program for the same age group and builds on *DIG!* by introducing post excavation techniques of artifact cleaning, ceramic mending, conservation, zooarchaeology, and environmental archaeology.

In the future Colonial Williamsburg's archaeology department plans to expand its public presentations at a new archaeological lab, and expansion into a year-round public excavation with wider public archaeology opportunities. A lively public archaeology program has also been established with schools outreach and teaching materials, and a weeklong teacher onsite development program based in our teacher institute. Programs have also been developed for our original buildings looking at upstanding features and buildings. *Building Detectives*, a program that has been running for three years, introduces people of all ages to architectural historian's techniques of investigation. In all of these programs the visitor is learning, through active participation in, and observation of, authentic archaeology onsite and *in situ*. While not explicitly so, they are all phenomenological in allowing the visitor to enact the archaeological roles they take on, and thereby consciously inhabit the moment of doing archaeology.

But what does the future hold? So far, we have discussed very physical environments for the application of phenomenology in an historical environment, but there is no reason why we need to stop there. The very concept of phenomenology is cerebral; in the cases so far put forward it is only manifest through behaviors in the physical world. The success of *Pokemon Go* in 2016 and 2017 (Wauhop, 2016) showed that people want to 'hack' their world and create their own experiences and relationships between the virtual and real worlds. By so doing they are creating their own phenomenological place in the physical world of Williamsburg's Historic Area.

In 2009 we began this very type of research. Our strategy was to re-analyze the archaeology of the city of Williamsburg, to visualize and experience it through digital models (See Figure 3). The project is called Virtual Williamsburg and so far, encompasses an area of twenty acres (about eight hectares) on the east end of 18th-century Williamsburg. Virtual Williamsburg is an experiential environment, one that provides a different experience to the one a visitor has in the real world of Colonial Williamsburg's Historic Area. To do this the archaeology was examined at a variety of scales and resolutions (Inker, in press). On a narrow scale site-specific micro environment were reconstructed with high levels of archaeological resolution. On the medium scale, the localized environment of a site could be reconstructed with a medium quality of archaeological resolution. Whereas, on the wider scale the city scape and regional environment was reconstructed with low archaeological resolution. Probably the most important reconstruction was Williamsburg's Capitol building, which was built in 1704, burnt down in 1747, then a second Capitol buildings was built on the ruins of the first in 1751, itself only surviving to the end of the century. Neither building had any substantial amount of information on its construction. Therefore, the reconstruction for Virtual Williamsburg was the first systematic attempt to thoroughly reassess the evidence for the building's interior and exterior since its latest physical incarnation at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the physical Williamsburg it was the first Capitol that was reconstructed, based on the larger amount of evidence available for its design and outward physical appearance. The second Capitol had only a few descriptions, none enlightening, and typified by Thomas Jefferson's indictment that most of the proportions of the building were either too small or too large, with Jefferson including no useful description of the physical form of the building itself (Jefferson, 1787, p.152). Therefore, for the virtual reconstruction we had to go back to first principles using the evidence of archaeological excavation and fragmentary architectural artefacts, subsequently supporting this with contemporary architectural analogy. We do have a single image of the loggia of the second capitol in a state of collapse, a water color by Benjamin Latrobe from 1796 (Latrobe, 1796). The image portrays the logia of the Capitol and is an example of how we can begin to explore phenomenologically the interior space of the building. The original statue of Lord Botetourt is still extant and currently stands in awkward surroundings in the basement of the Swem library at the college of William and Mary, Williamsburg. The statue shows all the evidence of its history and environmental damage. In 1993 the college of William and Mary decided to make a copy of the marble statue using casts from the original, the subsequent reconstruction being returned to a similar likeness to the 18th-century sculpture, although this time cast in bronze. For Virtual Williamsburg we laser scanned the copy, as well as modeled original fragments of pedestal, and base, enabling us to reconstruct the statue. Using the archaeological footprint, in conjunction with the watercolor, we were able to situate the reconstructed statue in its original location in the loggia of Williamsburg's second Capitol building (See Figure 3). This virtual environment is not only illustrative of the 1776 building but is an immersive, phenomenological, and experimental experience when explored in a fully virtual environment. As you walk through the virtual

space of the loggia, you are cognitively–if not physically–walking through another landscape. One could say then, that when we are participating in the non-physical environment of the virtual world, we are at the same time experiencing a purely cognitive, and therefore fundamentally phenomenological, experience. While we cannot recreate an exact replica of the past, we can create an environment where we can begin to experience the past, and a place that can prompt further questions and research.

In this brief overview of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation I have shown that the museum has many ways in which it aligns with the goals of the *Archaeology for the People* conference–the ways and practices through which we can convey values of archaeological heritage to the public '*for the people*'. Through the investigation, contextualization, and presentation of archaeological heritage, and interpretive museum theatre, both theoretical and practically we can explore what it is to visit the past at a museum. In all these areas we can describe the activities we are taking part in as phenomenological. The visitor is invited to become an active participant in an activity, whether physically in the case of hands-on archaeology, emotionally identifying with the character in the case of museum theatre, or virtually-cognitively in the case of virtual environments. This moves us from the realm of simply illustrative and passive demonstrations, to a world of active participation and engagement with our visitors, where they gain agency. It provides them with a richer and more nuanced experience of the past, placing them cognitively in the moment. This then, is truly a museum of, and for the people.

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FIG 1. CHILDREN TAKE PART IN HANDS-ON ACTIVITIES AT THE ANDERSON BLACKSMITH SHOP AND PUBLIC ARMOURY, WILLIAMSBURG. COPYRIGHT: THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

FIG 2. A CROWD OF VISITORS EXPERIENCE MUSEUM THEATRE IN FRONT OF THE RALEIGH TAVERN, WILLIAMSBURG. COPYRIGHT: THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION

FIG 3. DIGITAL RECONSTRUCTION OF THE STATUE OF LORD BOTETOURT IN THE LOGGIA OF WILLIAMSBURG'S SECOND CAPITOL, CA. 1776. COPYRIGHT: THE COLONIAL WILLIAMSBURG FOUNDATION