

The Emergence of Cold War Heritage: United Kingdom Cold War Bunkers and Sites

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Abstract : Despite the growing interest in the Cold War period and heritage, little attention has been paid to the presentation and curatorship of Cold War heritage in eastern or western Europe. In 2021 Leeds Beckett University secured a British Academy Grant to explore visitor experiences, curatorship, emotion, and memory at Cold War-related tourist sites, comparing the perspectives of eastern and western European sites through research carried out in the UK and Bulgaria. The research explores the themes of curatorship, experience, and memory. Many of the sites included in the research in the UK-based part of the project are nuclear bunkers that have been decommissioned and are now open to visitors. The focus of this conference abstract is one of several perspectives drawn from a British Academy Grant-funded project exploring curatorship, visitor experience and nostalgia and memory in former cold war spaces in the UK, bringing together critical comparisons between western and eastern European sites. The project identifies specifically the challenges of ownership, preservation and presentation and discusses the challenges facing those who own, manage, and provide access to cold war museums and sites. The research is underpinned by contested issues of authenticity and ownership, discussing narrative accounts of those involved in caring for and managing these sites. The research project draws from interviews with key stakeholders, site observations, visitor surveys, and content analysis of Trip advisor posts. Key insights from the project include the external challenges owners and managers face from a lack of recognition of and funding for important Cold War sites in the UK that are at odds with interest shown in cold war sites by visitors to Cold War structures and landmarks. The challenges center on the lack of consistent approaches toward cold war heritage conservation, management, and ownership, lack of curatorial expertise and over-reliance on no-expert interpretation and presentation of heritage, the effect of the passage of time on personal connections to cold war heritage sites, the dissipating technological knowledge base, the challenging structure that does not lend themselves easily as visitor attractions or museums, the questionable authenticity of artifacts, the limited archival material, and quite often limited budgets. A particularly interesting insight focusing on nuclear bunkers has been on the difficulties in site reinterpretation because of the impossibility of fully exploring the enormity of nuclear war as a consistent threat of the Cold War. Further insights from the research highlight the secrecy of many of the sites as a key marketing strategy, particularly in relation to the nuclear bunker sites included in the project.

Keywords : cold war, curatorship, heritage, nuclear bunkers.

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