

Abstract

This study investigates some of the ways in which people understand standing 'heritage' buildings and structures in the landscape. The investigation pays particular attention to people's visual understanding of such 'heritage' structures. The study also gains insight into some of the roles that 'heritage' structures in the landscape play in the negotiation of identity at national, European and local levels. These investigations are then used to contribute to the debate regarding the 'value of heritage' in contemporary society.

The study is grounded in literature on landscape and meanings of symbols in the landscape. It is argued that landscape features and 'heritage' sites flag nationalist meanings in particular. It is also argued that there is a multitude of social constructions of Europe, much less obvious than nationalist meanings that can be conveyed by features in the landscape. Lastly the concept of place-identity is used to suggest that the landscape and 'heritage' sites are imbued with multiple meanings at the local level.

Group interaction and talk was analysed from a series of family focus groups. The data when analysed suggested a particular form of viewing the world and making it understandable by reference to stereotyped 'pictures in the head'. These sets of socially constructed mental images are termed *visual repertoire*. A second element to the thesis is *focusing activity*. Through this activity the multiple meaning of visual repertoire are allowed to work; either smoothing over conflicts between multiple meanings or giving rise to conflict and leading to contested landscapes.

The implications of the thesis for the 'value of heritage' debate are subsequently discussed. The discussion suggests that 'heritage' has both multiple meaning and multiple natures. It can remain constant as a nationalist flag in the landscape, or remain unnoticed and banal for years but can become contested and politicised at the slightest change in social context.