

Archaeology is often the “hidden heritage” developers want to neutralise but eventually have to recognise.

An interview with John Peterson, president of the International Committee for Archaeological Heritage Management of ICOMOS



Dr John A. PETERSON is an anthropological archaeologist specialising in historical ecology and landscape studies. He has worked in the American Southwest, Texas, northern Mexico, China, Congo-Brazzaville, Ecuador, and, currently, in the Philippines. In the Philippines, he has conducted community archaeology programs through the University of San Carlos Department of Anthropology, Sociology and History community mapping and heritage preservation program. He has worked extensively on heritage programs with the Freely Associated States of Micronesia in Pohnpei, Yap, the Marianas, and Guam. He has served on the State of Texas State Board of Review, the State of Hawai'i Historic Preservation Board, the Guam Historical Preservation Board, and landmark commissions in San Elizario, El Paso, and Socorro, Texas.

Peterson is currently President of the International Committee for Archaeological Heritage Management, a scientific committee of ICOMOS that supports the World Heritage program. He is an adjunct professor at the University of San Carlos, an affiliate faculty member with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Hawai'i, and an adjunct professor with the Department of Anthropology at the University of Guam. He currently serves in Guam as the U.S. Navy liaison to the Guam Historical Preservation Office.

1. Plural. Heritage. Culture. Society Journal (Republic of Moldova) seeks to document and critically reflect on the intellectual trajectories of scholars who have contributed to the development of international heritage theory and practice. To begin, could you outline the formative stages of your early life and education? Where were you born and educated, and which personal, social, or educational influences from your childhood and school years do you think shaped your later interest in archaeology and cultural heritage?

I was reared in middle America, in Kansas and Missouri, and the intermontane West, and learned to love the wide-open landscapes of the plains, the prairies and the Rocky Mountains. There was still a sense of the “wild” West; only 60 years before my birth, the legends of the West were roaming the region, and I didn’t realise until many years later that they were bullies and miscreants. In the meantime, I explored their relict landscapes, like the sod houses of buffalo hunters and the “Indian” encampments that were still visible. Later, at the University of Chicago, I studied anthropology and, with scholars like Fred Eggan and Ray Foglesong, studied the academic lore of North American natives. After transferring to Antioch College at the height of the late-1960s cultural revolution, I switched to environmental studies and learned a smattering of botany and geology. After a decade-long lapse to farm and manage a living history farm in Ohio, I entered the anthropology-archaeology program at the University of Texas at Austin. My wife was training in Waldorf education and was offered a position in Austin, where we remained for another decade with our then-small children, Marina and Jesse. The 1980s in Austin were a golden period, with incredible live music, great cultural opportunities for the kids, and a vibrant community of archaeologists, many focused on geoarchaeology.

2. What led you to choose archaeology as a professional and academic field? Where did you undertake your initial training, and how did your early education shape your understanding of archaeology not only as a research discipline, but also as part of cultural heritage management and public responsibility? Which mentors or teachers were particularly influential in this regard?

I studied with Karl Butzer and Bill Doolittle in Geography, and Richard Adams, Richard Schaedel, and Jim Neely in anthropology; they were superb mentors who opened up global research and intellectual terrain for me. My anthropology background at Chicago prepared me intellectually, and through grounded experience at Antioch with work-study and field studies, I learned how to learn, not just what to learn. Then, after 10 years of farming, I got dirt under my fingernails and never could scrub it out. Through museum work at the historical farm I managed, I was immersed in heritage preservation with the Texas Historical Commission and their renowned Winedale Seminar in Museum management. I also earned a fellowship in Museum conservation at the Texas Memorial Museum, where Paul Storch and others mentored me in the rigours of the discipline. I also had a well-rounded education, mixed with the culture and music of the 1980s, when I co-owned a Texas folk bar called Emma-Joes and thrived on Shiner Bock and Central Texas BBQ. It was a great period in Austin’s history; now it seems too bourgeois. I managed a few large CRM projects in El Paso and the Texas High Plains and eventually was hired at the University of Texas at El Paso, a great base for doing archaeology with tribal groups and federal agencies in New Mexico, Arizona and Colorado, and also to work in northern Mexico. The field was always alluring, and during the warm months we often didn’t come in from the field; instead, we stayed outside, camping and doing surveys in the mountains



among the region's pueblo sites. That's where community archaeology really came alive for me, in the region's hispano and pueblo landscapes.



William Safford's home, Chillicothe, Ohio, near Hopewell ceremonial earthworks, a World Heritage Site

3. Did you have the opportunity to study under Professor Mircea Eliade? If so, which of his courses did you attend, and how would you assess his contribution to your intellectual formation? How did his scholarly perspective, pedagogical methods, or ethical approach shape your understanding of culture, history, and heritage?

One of the really treasured experiences of my Chicago education was taking courses from Mircea Eliade. His graduate seminars were incredible immersions in shamanic cultures and world history. In the spring of 1968, I enrolled in his course on "The Phenomenology of the Mystical Light". He had appointments at the School of Theology and the University of Chicago, so we met in their Mead Hall, a concrete Gothic recreation of old-world academia. We met at a long table with a roaring fire at one end. One night during the seminar, the power failed, a lightning storm hit, and gunfire rattled through the streets outside. It was April, the month of the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King and the eruption of violence in the west and south sides of Chicago. Professor Eliade kept us all calm and invoked the spirit of the mystical light from the fire, the lightning and the flashes of gunfire. It was truly extraordinary. Later at UT Austin, I studied with Amerigo Paredes and absorbed his encyclopaedic history of anthropology, which, like Eliade's, was incredibly erudite and brilliant. Eliade opened my eyes to the spiritual visions of premodern or traditional peoples that I would not have ever

experienced otherwise, and it has informed much of my work and contributions to knowledge throughout my career.

4. Are there specific discussions, experiences, or moments from your interactions with Professor Mircea Eliade that you consider particularly relevant to your later engagement with archaeological interpretation, heritage values, or cross-disciplinary thinking?

We, his seminar students, were shy and somewhat intimidated to be in the presence of a great scholar, but we shouldn't have been. When he read my papers for his seminar, he offered generous, constructive comments and praise where it was deserved. He was kind and attentive. I remember going to his office in Mead Hall. I recall that we had to visit him to retrieve our papers and grades, and he was always so friendly and supportive. Since then, I have tried to match that patience, thoroughness, and praise for students' papers, though I haven't always succeeded. Over the last ten years, I have worked with Iron Age ritual sites in the Philippines and Micronesia, and I have reread much of his work and reflected on his insights into intangible spiritual landscapes.



Harry's Bar, Venice, 2014

5. Under what institutional and professional circumstances did you begin your career in archaeology and heritage practice? Could you reflect on your first research projects or fieldwork experiences in terms of their methodological approach, heritage management context, and the professional standards that guided your work at that time?



After Chicago, Antioch, farming and museum work and moving to Austin, I had to either work or go back to school. I did a lot of freelance writing, but as most people will tell you, it rarely pays the bills. Friends at the Quaker Meeting in Austin encouraged me to apply to the archaeology program at UT and said it was a great gig doing CRM in the warm months, school in the winter. I did, and found it agreeable and much more lucrative than dime-a-word articles on Texas history or new music beats. I worked on great projects with fine, experienced, and brilliant geoarchaeologists, and took a crash course in regional Texas, American Southwest, and northern Mexican archaeology. I took a brief sojourn in the western stream of African Bantu archaeology in the People's Republic of Congo. I dipped into Andean studies with colleagues

working at historical and Incan sites in the Altiplano. I met and worked with luminaries like Richard MacNeish, Karl Butzer, and Stephen Hall. Later, in 2000, following a bitter divorce, I accepted an invitation to attend a seminar on Visayan Studies at the University of San Carlos in Cebu, Philippines, and my world flipped upside down. A new tropical forest terrain, but an opportunity to apply lessons learned in Plains geomorphology in a new maritime and tropical regime. It seems like a short time, but I just compiled several articles from the past 25 years in the region for a volume called *Reading Visayan Landscapes*. It echoes a book I read in high school, May Watts's *Reading the Landscape*, which inspired me for its simplicity and its rigorous, anecdotal interpretation of landscape evolution in frontier America.

6. *Looking back, which of your projects do you regard as the most significant from the perspective of archaeological heritage management? What outcomes—scientific, managerial, or policy-related—do you consider particularly important, and what lessons did these projects provide regarding the protection, conservation, and sustainable use of archaeological heritage?*

In Texas, I served on the State Review Board for the Texas Historical Commission for six years, and as chair of the Socorro and San Elizario Texas Historical Landmark Committees, as well as the El Paso HLC. Later, I served on the Hawaii Board and then in Guam. Each of these communities and preservation



Walk for the American Cancer Society, 2014, with Boonie dog Addie 2007-2024.

contexts was different, with very different resources, communities, and development impacts. I worked with local, state, and federal legal structures and priorities. I worked with federal agencies including the US Forest Service, military installations, the Corps of Engineers, and others, and with many management regimes of the National Historic Preservation Act, including Traditional Cultural Properties and community preservation activities. Through this work, I became engaged in ICOMOS and World Heritage missions, and the overlapping preservation strategies, structures, and visions. Working on site missions at Nan Madol in Pohnpei, Micronesia; the Northern Tohoku Jomon Sites serial nomination; and the Tilaurakot-Kapilvastu site in Nepal, among others, has been an incredible opportunity to learn and contribute to global heritage preservation. Three wonderful preservation colleagues, Willem Willems, Ian Lilley, and Cynthia Dunning, attracted me to ICAHM. As president, I have been able to continually grow, support, and learn from wonderful, dedicated preservationists around the world.



Central Park, NYC

7. Contemporary archaeology increasingly intersects with heritage policy, impact assessment, risk management, and sustainable development, extending into areas such as industrial, Arctic, and conflict-related archaeology. How do you evaluate these developments, and what challenges and opportunities do they pose for archaeological heritage management in the 21st century?

Archaeology is often the “hidden heritage” developers want to neutralise but eventually have to recognise. Strategies can usually facilitate development



while protecting archaeology, or at least mitigating or avoiding impacts. The US NHPA is a consultation process, not dictatorial, and encourages cooperation. In practice, it's the kind of world Canadian Prime Minister Mark Carney envisions: multiple cooperating nations instead of domineering hegemonic power brokers. Sustainable, landscape-friendly development can plan and design around archaeological resources, protect them, and still pursue goals for housing, transport, or defence; the process also helps fund learning about archaeology while considering preservation strategies. Greed and self-aggrandisement are the biggest enemies of heritage preservation. The archaeological landscapes of world empires have ironically preserved the seeds of their destruction! If we continue to disrespect the land, nature, and the past preserved in the landscape, our own blunders will be preserved for future generations as witnesses to our narcissism. On the other hand, archaeological sites preserve the long histories of sustainable polities, such as the Jomon sites of northern Tohoku or Buddhist sites in Japan like Hiraizumi, or Phu Prabat in Thailand.



Ngorongoro Crater, ICAHM conference field trip, 2017, Bangsomoro, Tanzania

8. As President of ICAHM and an active member of ICOMOS, how do you view the role of ICAHM in shaping international standards, guidelines, and best practices for the management of archaeological heritage? How does ICAHM contribute to implementing ICOMOS doctrines and to dialogue with institutions such as UNESCO and national heritage authorities?

ICOMOS and its doctrines, which have evolved since the 1970s, set high standards for heritage preservation. Earlier work focused on the significance and

authenticity of sites and on elucidating their outstanding universal values. Still, ICOMOS increasingly emphasises more inclusive preservation strategies, such as intangible cultural heritage, sustainable development, and climate change adaptation. The future of our human experiment is fragile; the outcomes of abuses of energy exploitation, overpopulation, and unsustainable development are already evident and disastrous. ICOMOS enshrines respect for nature, culture, and heritage, along with tools for preservation. In practice, it is sometimes a balancing act to preserve and protect World Heritage properties while acknowledging flaws in their nominations, such as governance or intrusive elements. However, we cannot afford to be purists; World Heritage should remain inclusive, not elitist. High standards are essential to protect the World Heritage concept, but they must also allow properties with outstanding universal value to be listed, even if they have rough edges. ICOMOS can lead and mentor improvements to these sites, or propose commemorating them through other designations or frameworks such as Geoparks. The upstreaming process ICOMOS now practises is an innovative way to achieve recognition while maintaining very high standards. It's a dialogue, not a dictum.

9. In your experience, what are the principal challenges facing archaeological heritage management today—particularly in relation to urban development, climate change, armed conflict, and economic pressures? How can ICOMOS standards and ICAHM expertise support more effective and ethical decision-making in these contexts?

Climate change is the single most threatening crisis looming on the near horizon, but it will unfortunately also exacerbate all the other barriers to heritage preservation! As livelihoods are challenged, homelands are destroyed by aridity, extreme weather, and sea level rise, warming oceans impact marine life and maritime habitus, extreme wealth and poverty increase in the struggle for dominance and self-aggrandisement, and planning and preservation priorities are abandoned in favour of growth and overshoot, e.g., to maintain balance, we need to find comfort in our families, our communities, our natural landscapes, and our places of significance, so World Heritage becomes increasingly significant not just to honour and preserve, but to provide solace in a dying world. ICOMOS and ICAHM values, best practices, and methodologies need to be applied to a broader set of places and practices than only those eligible for the highest World Heritage designation; we need to promote the ICOMOS agenda in local, state, national, and regional contexts.

10. Finally, what role should heritage education play in strengthening the future of archaeology and archaeological heritage management? What changes are needed in academic curricula, professional training, and public outreach to better prepare young professionals for the responsibilities and ethical dimensions of working with archaeological heritage?

In what direction is education trending? Toward digital or AI machinations and one-dimensional experiences of life, existence, and reality? It's emerged as a great tool for teaching, but has become the thing-itself, the fallacy of misplaced



concreteness. Education needs to be grounded in experience in human communities and in natural environments. Heritage sites in those contexts, of significant human experience and history, of natural places with high biodiversity and integrity, places redolent with life and earth history, are essential for education through hands-on experience. Travel to such places will be challenging as resources diminish. Still, we must preserve such environments in the region or nearby home places in the face of commercial development and landscape erasure. Real human contact and affectionate, cooperative communities are the best antidotes to plastic, one-dimensional interaction. TikTok is pornography, but a caress is human and a kiss, divine.

Sergiu MUSTEAȚĂ