

Ashley Palazzo

HIST 694

Major Assignment #1

Physical Site: Mount Vernon

The historic site that I chose to visit was Mount Vernon in Virginia. This historic site is the homestead of the United States' first president, George Washington. The Estate is a very large site and their visitor center and educational center has many exhibits to choose from. For this project I chose to focus on the house itself as I took a tour of the inside of the house. The historical argument presented at this part of the site was to tell the story of George Washington's home life through the presentation of his home and furnishings. The tour begins at the 'servants hall' and takes you through the house room by room with interpreters stationed in each one of the spaces the visitor was able to view. They gave a brief overview of the space and the context of that particular room. The tour does move quite quickly leaving not much time for visitors to ask questions in the rooms. Each space has George Washington's furnishings from his time living in Mount Vernon. There are barriers to protect the furnishings and the interpreters were standing behind those barriers. I was not permitted to go to the second or third floor of the home to see the spaces up there. The physical spaces communicate George Washington's home life quite well as the pieces placed in the rooms were there in Washington's lifetime and represent what Mount Vernon looked like at the time they wish to interpret. The primary audience that Mount Vernon is attempting to reach with this house tour is traditional museum goers and school groups. This type of tour would allow for many groups to be able to simultaneously go through the house and see how Washington lived. School groups tend to have quite a few students and this tour style would cater well to that particular audience. While I was on site, I noticed a lot of family groups with small children, older couples, and a handful of college aged folks. The overall majority of the people on site at the same time I was, were white and mainly fell into the older couple category.

Inside the home, the primary items that were used to communicate their historic message were the furniture and the restoration of the house itself. There were a few interpretive signs that were located on the historic grounds to frame the context of the buildings. The signs gave information such as who may have been using these outbuildings and what their role would have been. Inside the home, the interpreters that were stationed in the spaces were there to provide context verbally. As far as how the site was laid out, it was quite nice compared to some other historic sites I have visited. The site was well laid out and very easy to navigate. A visitor will first park in the designated parking lots and enter through their visitor center, which is clearly marked. This then flows into the historic area with plenty of wayfinding signage and employees stationed to help visitors orient themselves. There was a sign for where visitors were to meet to get in line for the tour of the house and an employee was also there to check ticket times. There is no single way to navigate the historic grounds, but once in the house there is only one way to go, directed by the staff and velvet ropes.

On the historic grounds there are opportunities to interact with some elements, including the farm animals and the ability to explore the grounds and check out the various outbuildings. Once inside the home, there are no interactive elements of any kind. There are no reproduction items to touch or interact with and no visual or audio interactions on the house tour. On the grounds there are a few interpreters sprinkled throughout and they are very willing to answer any questions and engage with the visitors. There was even an archaeologist out working on an open unit outside that was available to answer questions or discuss what they were doing. Inside the house during the tour, there were interpreters stationed in each room that visitors were allowed to stop in. They were not in historic dress and their role was to provide context to the space. I did see two interpreters dressed as Martha and George Washington in the garden visiting with the public and answering questions. Also on the historic grounds, there were some of the outbuildings with interpreters that were in historic dress demonstrating some 18th century trades such as blacksmithing. They were also interacting with visitors and willing to answer questions.

I am personally not a fan of this particular tour style that was used for the house tour at Mount Vernon. The tour style as it currently stands felt a bit like I was being pushed through and was not a very personal experience. If I were to make some suggestions for changes, I would have allowed for more time per tour slot as well as more built-in time for questions. I would also suggest implementing some sort of interactives to be incorporated into the tour somehow. I understand there is the struggle at Mount Vernon with having original 18th century furnishings throughout the home and the number of visitors they receive every day. The barriers are needed in many cases, but can feel unwelcoming and discourage interactivity. The possible solution would be to have one space be dedicated to having reproductions to allow for visitors to explore that space more freely.

Digital Site: MountVernon.org

For the digital portion of this project, I took a look at the virtual tour of the historic grounds and house on the Mount Vernon website. In the virtual tour the creators are trying to provide context for Washington's home and what life may have been like inside Mount Vernon. The interpretive point of view is a modern look at Mount Vernon and the purposes of each space. The virtual tour explores architectural elements, furnishings, and context for each space. The primary audiences for this are visitors that aren't able to visit Mount Vernon in person and schools to use as a resource in the classroom. The virtual tour is a complete look at the home and historic grounds with 360-degree photographs of each space with written text boxes. The assumption being that a person can read these text boxes and have access to a computer that can run this virtual tour.

The virtual tour is on the Mount Vernon website under both the "The Estate" and "Education" tabs. It doesn't have a clear single flow of use and the user has many opportunities to explore using different routes. This site offers a close up look at the rooms inside the house and even the rooms that cannot be seen when visiting onsite. It offers text and video pop outs to provide further context about the spaces. There are 360-degree photographs that can be viewed at

one's leisure with no time limit as well as an option to view the text in several other languages. The interactive element with this tour is the action of choosing where to go by clicking the direction arrows. There are also spots to click to get more information about a specific item in the room. I didn't feel like this interactive element took away from the experience but instead enhanced it. There was also an option to view the virtual tour in virtual reality. There is not a direct link on the virtual tour to interact with the creators and I found the 'contact us' page for the site quite difficult to find.

If I were to make suggestions to make this virtual tour experience more effective, I would add an option for audio for each one of the text boxes for accessibility. I would also turn the sensitivity of the clicking within the experience down as it was difficult to navigate at points. I would also suggest having a spot for interaction with the creators of the experience. A possible solution could be to add a questions link or comment section. With some small changes this could be a very effective tool used by more people.