



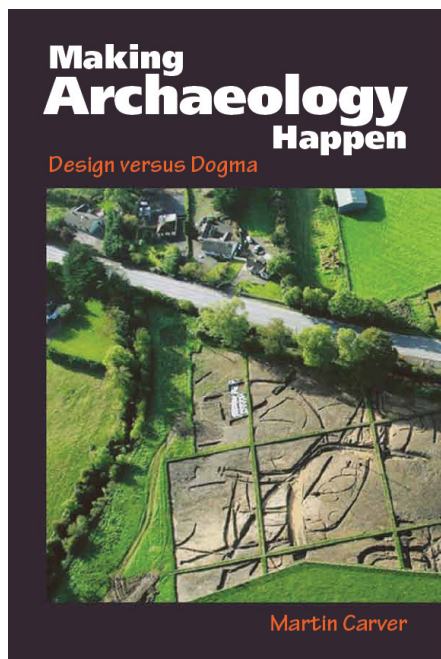
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REVIEWS



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Making Archaeology Happen Design versus Dogma

[by Martin Carver]

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Summary: *This book is a consideration of archaeological fieldwork, the way in which it is practised, its possibilities and how it could be improved. Through the critical analysis of the components that determine this primary research and the reality of its implementation, Carver defends an archaeological practice more responsible in a professional, social and economical level, able to give effective responses to the multiplicity of situations that archaeologists find when working. All this should be built through a procedure –design– that has to contribute with creative solutions, escaping from dogmas and searching for a stronger social engagement.*

Once you have Carver's book in your hands, you feel inevitably attracted to the title: *Making archaeology happen*; a good way to start an essay. Moreover, *Design versus Dogma*. It does not happen very often that the word "design" becomes the center of attention when giving consideration to archaeology as a profession. But, what does Carver mean with *design*?

An interesting starting point for dealing with this question –and with the book in general- is to take into account whether archaeology, in this case focused on archaeological fieldwork, can be considered a science or an art, or both at the same time. The author suggests it at the beginning of the book and, direct or indirect, this is a constant idea throughout the text. Probably most archaeologists would answer the question quickly, choosing what seems more evident. But let's be patient.

Fieldwork is undoubtedly the practice most frequently associated with archaeology, both by the general public and professionals. Even though archaeology goes further, it is true that archaeological fieldwork constitutes the foundation on which the knowledge of the past is built. But, what does fieldwork activity imply?

When facing a new project, archaeologists have to deal with many different things: obviously, with one –or more- archaeological sites, the characteristics and conditions of which can be extremely different –as they actually are; also, with requirements imposed from above, sometimes related to research, others –most- related to record and preservation; moreover, they have to deal –commercial archaeologists know it well- with pressures from different groups whose interests are closely related to archaeological intervention; and, finally -we should not forget it- they are dealing with a community, a human group that coexists with the site, being more or less involved with the project, but, at the end, it is always affected by the archaeological work (Pyburn, 2009). In a kind of juggling game, archaeologists have to deal with all these elements, coordinating them in a coherent and well-balanced way in order to be successful. Otherwise, one of the juggling props could fall down and then the game would be over.

It is known that, when developing fieldwork, archaeologists are able to resort to using scientific methods and precise technologies. But we must also remember that archaeology studies societies of the past -that is inevitably influenced by the social context in which it is embedded- and, furthermore, its work has to be done in the public interest. Taking this into account, can archaeology be considered just as an empirical science? Obviously not. Archaeology, as Carver argues, is a science, a social science and an art at the same time; *"it's a historical pursuit deploying scientific procedures in a social arena"* (p. 33). As our discipline deals with so many different fields and variables, it seems logical to think that there is not a unique model which can be applied to every case, but, on the contrary, each case needs its

own method, a particularized design; this is, at least, what in Carver's opinion makes archaeology happen.

But what is our real situation? Does archaeology happen as it really could? Are we matching the actual possibilities when practising archaeology? These are some of the questions that Carver poses in this interesting book. Let's see some of his approaches.

The book

In the preface Carver makes it quite clear; the current book gives consideration to archaeological practice after thirty years of fieldwork experience. Archaeologists, as the author complains, do not think often about their profession, about what they do and why they do it. Unfortunately, lack of self-criticism has led archaeological work to a kind of permanent stagnation: "*I believe that archaeological practice has become unduly fossilized, and our procedures are unambitious, unquestioning, standardized, resigned to a low quality and wedded to default systems*" (p. 10). Given the circumstances, Carver has decided to analyze the elements and stakeholders that take part in designing archaeological practice, showing what is missed and highlighting its possibilities. However, as he explains at the beginning of the book, this text has been thought in an informal way, "*like a lunchtime chat at the site edge, or in the bar at the end of the day*" (p. 10). As a result, here we have an easy-to-read book that offers a well-structured trip through archaeological fieldwork, with interesting considerations and proposals.

The book has six chapters and is divided into two main parts; the first one –integrated by the two first chapters- is devoted to the analysis of different realities that influence the design of archaeological practice. The second one –composed of the two last chapters- concentrates on critics and proposals. Between them there is chapter 4, where the author presents some examples in order to illustrate his arguments.

As Carver says, everything we do is driven by our context, that is to say, our life experiences, our social and home environment, our academic training. Obviously, archaeological practice is not unaware of this situation, so the construction we make of the past, our research objectives and the way we apply a particular method are inevitably conditioned by our context. This consideration is what brings Carver to carry out *A visit to the ancestors* in chapter 1. Here he goes over different distinguished figures in archaeological theory and method in order to evidence how, according to their context, they generated

particular methods of excavation that were sometimes taken as dogmas of unquestionable validity -the author applies himself to this exercise in introspection and highlights which episodes in his life have determined the way he understands archaeology. Based on this idea, Carver starts building his discourse: there is no standardized and universally valid method for archaeology; on the contrary, archaeologists must evaluate possibilities according to different circumstances and, at this point, use their ingenuity and the most suitable techniques; *"Doing Archaeology is not a matter of being right or wrong, but of being appropriate"* (p. 33). This process is what Carver calls design. There are, therefore, countless possibilities.

But what are the factors that determine the differences among the projects and the need of particular design? Apart from research agenda, Carver underlines the terrain and the social context. The first one is discussed in chapter 2 where, taking into consideration the fact that what is recovered by archaeology is not an objective reality -*"what we see is what we seek"* (p. 37)-, the author carries out a categorization of the components that constitute the archaeological deposit according to its detection and analysis possibilities -mega, macro, micro and nano categories- and talks about the implemented techniques and how technological advances have helped to increase the scope of archaeological research.

Another crucial factor when designing an archaeological project is the social context. In chapter 3 Carver analyzes the influence of the socio-political situation through different levels: successful civic movements in the archaeological field; the kind of State and the way it generates particular professional practices; and professional relationships and status derived from the rise of market values in the archaeological work. The author defends a socially engaged archaeology by promoting social participation, and responsibility based on the production of new knowledge; this is, in Carver's opinion, the real value of archaeology. Archaeologists should channel their efforts towards that value and from here society should start revaluating professional archaeology.

The way in which these three determining factors -research objectives, terrain and social context- interact and take part in archaeological practice, can be found in some interesting and illustrative examples from all over the world in chapter 4.

Without a doubt, chapter 5 is the most interesting. After the analysis of what the author considers a real and effective field

research procedure, and after paying attention to the main troubles of archaeological practice both in commercial and academic perspective, Carver proposes a "*remedial strategy*" in which concepts like design, quality, research, collaboration and social engagement are the main characters; in other words, "*a procurement procedure that can unify both sectors [university and commercial archaeology] and serve their publics*" (p. 119).

Chapter 6 brings the discussion to an end, with a proposal on how archaeology could face and solve its current situation, what would -in his opinion- happen with the consolidation of the main mission of the discipline -the production of new knowledge- and with an improvement in communicating with the general public and especially with the directly related agents. In spite of the current problems, the author discerns some hope in his conclusion message.

Conclusions

If at the beginning of his book Carver complains about how little archaeologists think about their work, now, after reading it, he can be pleased to know that his text makes it happen, inevitably.

The book is an accurate diagnosis of some of the main obstacles that weigh down archaeological work, which he rightly attribute to external and internal factors -self-criticism task which is appreciative because archaeologists often take pains to blame others, trying to escape from any responsibility. It is true that most questions discussed in the book seem evident and are not new -Faulkner, for example, wrote an interesting article about standardization in archaeology and the need of enriching the methods (Faulkner, 2000); moreover, we are sick and tired of hearing over and over again about some topics -among them the central dilemma university-research vs. commercial archaeology-record sites; but the fact is that things are still being developed in the same way and initiatives going further are very few.

An interesting point in this book is that Carver does not only analyze and criticize the situation of archaeological work, but also talks about its potential and offers some proposals in order to improve it. It is very appealing, in this sense, the idea of unifying efforts from universities -that produce new research- and commercial archaeology -that manage research resources- as two parts of the same machine, with the aim to strengthen archaeological practice in which -and this is the real contribution of the book- design becomes the backbone of archaeological practice. That is to say, trying to offer creative and high-

quality projects, properly valued by costumers and society –as happens with architects, with whom Carver makes an analogy- that should have positive consequences both in social and professional fields. In this sense, the idea of 'design competition', instead of competitive tender based on money, is frankly interesting. However, it would need a real public awareness, and the task is not easy.

From my point of view, the most remarkable thing in the book is how the author calls for social engagement and ethics in archaeological practice; not because he considers that the social context is probably the most influential factor when designing an archaeological project, but because he claims for social participation since the beginning –that is to say, in the decision making, in the archaeological excavation and, of course, as a main beneficiary of the archaeological work. Nevertheless, there is something that I would like to specify: considering the knowledge of the past -as Carver does- the main value of archaeology. Obviously, I agree with him, but in my opinion archaeology's possibilities go further than producing knowledge. Actually, we know through many examples that archaeology can contribute to the improvement of some aspects of people's daily life, and not necessarily due to the production of new knowledge, but because of the archaeological practice itself. Carver even comments on this fact and values it in a positive way, but does not give enough importance to it. In my opinion, what is remarkable is that in archaeology not only the product has a social value, but also the process of archaeological practice itself; and this value has very different possibilities, from satisfying personal necessities to encouraging collective tools, skills and attitudes (Merriman, 2007).

In any case, it is to appreciate that in an observation on archaeological practice and its methods the author has underlined the importance of the social component, something often forgotten; after all "*archaeological investigation is not a piece of private head-scratching but a public act of courage*" (p. 136). Knowing this, I strongly recommend Carver's book to every professional in archaeology. We know what our reality is and how it affects us, although not always we admit our responsibilities. However, if we are to keep archaeology alive, to turn it into a viable and socially engaged practice, then we must start readjusting the way we are carrying out our work. *Making Archaeology Happen. Design versus Dogma* can be an interesting starting point for this.

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