

Brace for impact: cargo cults and magical thinking in development-led archaeology



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Community participants supervised in the drawbridge pit by professional archaeologists. Credit: DigVentures

I have a wonderful cartoon by Sidney Harris that will bring a wry smile to anyone who's read (or written!) a breezy account of how the public has benefited from a development-led project. It features two boffins, standing in front of a blackboard, pointing to two halves of a complex equation, with the words '... then a miracle occurs...' linking the formula together.

'Hmnn', says the first boffin, 'I think you should be more explicit here in step two.'

It's fair to say that our profession struggles with its own 'step two' problem: demonstrating the causal link between development-led archaeology and the ensuing public benefit it is assumed to perform. Without a logical frame of reference, it is unsurprising that there is no agreed methodology for collecting evidence to establish the positive difference we make to the world, no exactitude around how the word 'impact' is bandied about, and no way to compare the results of different archaeological organisations. What is surprising, however, is that our science-based discipline persists in making often highly aspirational claims of public benefit with a lack of rigour that would not be tolerated if it were applied to interpretations of the past.

The physicist Richard Feynman called this type of thinking 'cargo cult science', based on the anthropologically observed practice of isolated island communities in the South Pacific during the Second World War. Convinced that the soldiers, supplies and seemingly unending cargo brought by plane to neighbouring islands could be attracted through ritual observance, islanders flattened vegetation to look like landing strips, built mock control towers, bamboo planes, and even mimicked Air Traffic Control by whispering into bamboo radios, imploring the planes to land. 'But it doesn't work,' said Feynman, drawing similar conclusions to Harris's 'step two' satirisation of scientists' taken-for-granted assumptions. 'No

airplanes land. So I call these things cargo cult science, because they follow all the apparent precepts and forms of scientific investigation, but they're missing something essential, because the planes don't land.'

As we emerge into a post-pandemic future, the incentive – social, political and economic – will be to further redefine archaeology's 'essential something' in terms of public benefit, and to build this in a way that actually flies. In *TA 108* I welcomed this loss of innocence, arguing that magical thinking could be replaced with a 'new New Archaeology' of public value, where claims could be hypothesised as a Theory of Change and impact accurately evaluated against Standards of Evidence. In *TA 110* I proposed a platform approach to archaeology, challenging the assumptions of a knowledge production process that siloes public benefit to the end of the pipeline, arguing that a crowd-based participatory model addresses the market failure inherent in client-funded investigations.

In this final instalment I want to point to the *Gatehouse Project, Pontefract Castle*, one of several recent examples where we have extended the DigVentures crowd-based model into a competitively tendered development-led context. The results were surprising – the published article and film can be found at the doi link below – detailed with a transparent and open-access evaluation of the project's social impact.

The salient point with this project is that our involvement would have been highly unlikely if Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and Historic England had not structured procurement towards the best research and impact design, rather than selecting from several versions of the lowest possible price. This created the space for creativity, experimentation and

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References:

Mazzucato, M 2021 *Mission Economy*, London: Penguin

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collaboration, firmly in line with the requirements of the Social Value Model for public sector bodies to consider the social, economic and environmental benefits of contracts they award. As Mariana Mazzucato has argued in her recent book *Mission Economy*, this repositions government from a passive fixer of market failure to an active shaper and co-creator of public value. In Pontefract this partnership approach enabled us to propose a creative approach to investigation, with an intelligently designed mix of professional excavation and public participation, the results of which were a step-change improvement on the traditional standard fare of an occasional open day or interpretation board.

Doing good in any way is clearly a positive contribution to society, but procurement models need to go beyond generalities to a more sophisticated understanding of what public value is being created and how this is being measured. To a person with a hammer every problem is a nail; if the blunt instrument of archaeology procurement continues as a one-size-fits-all solution, our field will be full of bamboo planes delivering public benefit on a wing and a prayer.



(left) Finds room activities for children and families. Credit: DigVentures

(below) Parent and child DigCamp excavation of the Victorian deposits. Credit: DigVentures

