Interpreting the Production Facilities of the Manhattan Project

Hidden in remote corners of the American landscape are the crumbling remains of the Manhattan Project, the United States’ top-secret effort to produce the atomic weapons that leveled Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. Isolated, massive, deteriorating, and in some cases, contaminated, the surviving industrial buildings of the Manhattan Project present serious challenges to preservationists. In addition, the history of the project and its relationship to the atomic bombings, topics that continue to spark vigorous public debate, pose an equally difficult interpretation problem. This thesis examines the process of interpreting these sites for a public audience. It argues for an interpretive approach that treats the Manhattan Project not as a distant historical episode but as an event that continues to impact the present. Through an analysis of the spaces and meanings of the project, this thesis contends that a successful interpretation of the Manhattan Project should encourage dialogue and debate about the history and implications—both positive and negative—of nuclear weapons production.