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Key Challenges for Administrators of Built Heritage Tourism Destinations in Poland at the Beginning of the 21st Century

Keywords: tourism, heritage, management

Abstract

The article explores the key issues affecting built heritage tourism destination management in Poland in the first two decades of the 21st c. Author explored the duties of heritage administrators and analysed their activities and strategies in the face of contemporary technological and cultural changes. Based on literature review, digital content analysis, postal survey, personal observation and interviews the study demonstrates that administrators of some heritage destinations in Poland may have yet to embrace the advances of the post-modern era in order to better prepare themselves to respond to the dynamics of the tourism market. The data presented in the article was collected during a statutory research project carried out at the Tourism Department, College of World Economy, Warsaw School of Economics in the year 2019. The study originated in part from a doctoral research project completed at Newcastle University, UK, in 2013, also referenced in this article.

Introduction

There is ample evidence that, at the beginning of the 21st century, cultural tourism is among the fastest developing categories of tourism. In fact, it is estimated that the motivation to encounter foreign cultures, to visit cultural events and heritage sites for the purpose of education, experience or entertainment are the main factors behind approximately 40% of all international travels [Richards 2018; UNWTO 2018]. Cultural tourism, in its variety of hues and guises, has also been an increasingly studied phenomenon both in Polish and in international literature [e.g.: Richards 2003, 2018; Mikos von Rohrscheidt 2008, 2016; Kowalczyk 2008; McKercher and DuCros 2012; Chabiera et al. 2017].

The cultural and heritage components of travel have been growing in significance for both leisure and business tourists. In the case of the former the trend has been reinforced by the modern tourist's search for individualised experiences and deeper emotions, helped by the spreading of IT solutions, such as online booking and dynamic packaging, and the constantly growing diversity of available cultural pursuits [Stasiak 2013; Mikos von Rohrscheidt 2017; Richards 2018; Fang 2020]. Business tourists, in turn, have (re)discovered culture thanks to the rise of the bleisure phenomenon, i.e. intertwining of business and leisure activities, in part forced by the Millennials entering the labour market with a markedly liberal attitude to the work-life balance [Kachniewska 2015; Lichy and McLeay 2017; Celuch 2018; Ślęzak 2018]. Cultural and heritage attractions have therefore found themselves no longer catering only to the discerning and educated, archetypal cultural tourists, despite the effort and cultural capital conventionally required to fully interpret and comprehend their historical and artistic value [Rebanks Consulting 2009; Fujiwara et al. 2018]. Indeed, it has recently transpired that cultural sites are also highly prized by the youngest generations of tourists, who seek *instagrammable* locations to enhance their social media narratives [Paris and Pietsching 2015; Koskowski 2019a].

Many cultural destinations have reacted to these novel demands by rendering themselves ever more accessible and attractive to visitors, despite concerns that it would undermine the primary responsibility of heritage sites which is preservation and conservation of artefacts, monuments and landmarks [Murzyn-Kupisz 2012]. Employing some of the latest technological developments, in particular information technologies, such as 3D scanning or Virtual and Augmented Reality etc., administrators of a growing number of cultural sites and institutions – e.g. music halls, art galleries, museums, heritage sites – have set out to embrace the concept of entertainment [Smith 2016; Koskowski 2019b; Little et al. 2020]. On the one hand, this could be seen as a creative response to the changing needs of their audiences – seeking emotions, engagement and more direct participation [Campos et al. 2015] – but on the other hand it can also be interpreted as a pragmatic move to secure economic survival in the face of a growing competition and falling art and culture subsidies [Kidd 2011]. Regardless of the motivation, the resulting *eventisation* of culture, i.e. re-interpreting of cultural assets in an ever more entertaining way, has no doubt achieved the objective of making culture more accessible to a larger audience [Smith 2016].

It has to be noted, however, that the success of cultural sites to respond to the ever changing needs of cultural and heritage tourists often comes with a cost. Primarily, it requires continuous balancing of the preservation and adaptation efforts, often under public and political pressure to loosen the conservationist discipline [Detloff 2015; Koskowski 2015; Little et al. 2020]. Achieving and maintaining the position of a heritage tourism destination requires that a certain degree of accessibility and quality are maintained at all times [Grefe 2004; Murzyn-Kupisz 2012]. Telling a captivating story of a place requires a degree of imaginative interpretation; staging a thrilling show for the general public might lead to excessive simplification of the narrative. In both cases there is a risk that enjoyment will come at the expense of more profound educational and emotional experiences, even putting the very identity of a place and its cultural distinctiveness at stake [Getz 2008; Quinn 2009; Bernick and Boo 2013; Koskowski 2019b].

The fragmented and, as of late, fast changing nature of tourism – and of cultural tourism in particular – means that majority of cultural destinations, which are typically managed as separate entities, face numerous trials with little preparedness. This paper set out to study the key challenges facing administrators of cultural tourist attractions on the example of a choice of built heritage sites in Poland.

Methodological remarks

This paper is based largely on the findings of an explorative statutory research project completed at the Department of Tourism of Warsaw School of Economics in November 2019. The project included a critical literature review, desktop analysis of website and social media content, and fieldwork visits. The literature review encompassed the open repository of Warsaw School of Economics as well as a comprehensive search of the Polish language resources of the academia.edu platform with respect to keywords ‘zarządzanie zabytkami’. The digital content analysis covered websites, social media profiles (fanpages) and, where appropriate, customer review/booking services booking.com and TripAdvisor, in as far as they referred to the visited destinations. The visits to selected sites were carried out by the author in the year 2019, and consisted mainly of personal observations complemented at times by unstructured interviews/conversations with owners and administrators of individual sites. Some of the conversations took place off-site. The participative, ethnographic character of the study means that not all of the studied destinations can be named for confidentiality reasons which means that the below list of studied sites is not exhaustive:

- Castles and military structures: Fort Gerharda (Świnoujście), Tower in Siedlęcín, Tenczyn Castle, Żywiec Castle;
- Palaces and manor houses: Bielsko-Biała, Pszczyna, Siemczyno, Żywiec;
- Other sites: open-air museum in Pszczyna, Tarnowskie Góry Silver Mine, open-air museum in Ślemień, Slavic-Viking settlement in Wolin (reconstruction), Żywiec Cathedral.

It needs to be noted that the abovementioned study was grounded in an earlier, doctoral research project completed by the author in 2013 at the International Centre for Cultural and Heritage Studies, Newcastle University, UK. The project, which encompassed a series of site visits in 2009 and a qualitative and quantitative survey of purposefully selected 227 castles throughout Poland, included an inquiry into the scope and nature of tasks facing castle administrators at different levels of responsibility, with a specific focus on their activities in years 2003-2007. Some of the findings of that study are also presented in the article.

Heritage management in Polish economic literature – exploratory review

Even a brief literature overview suggests that built heritage management is a topic rarely explored by Polish economists. Majority of the original, Polish publications in this field, identified in the course of this research, were released in the second decade of the 21st century. Moreover, many of the heritage-related publications that discuss aspects of economics and/or management were not written by economists. It could be argued that culture management in general is a relatively young academic sub-discipline, and also one difficult to pursue due to its interdisciplinary positioning at the intersection of management sciences, public administration and cultural studies [Kukołowicz 2015; Dziurski et al. 2017].

It appears that the relative lack of economists' interest in the matter of heritage management in Poland might be a consequence of the dominant public ownership of majority of heritage buildings and sites in the country. It is commonly assumed that the sites, which are public property, are generally immune to market forces, and as such should rather be of interest for public administration scholars [Peacock 1995]. On the other hand, even in such circumstances some economic models and theories could still be applied in the face of inherent scarcity of public money and the need to compete for external funding. Several authors have indeed admitted that publicly-owned heritage assets are not exempt from the necessity to choose between competing needs and limited resources [Murzyn-Kupisz 2010; Kubiszewska 2014; Kukołowicz 2015]. Nevertheless, the identified pragmatic calls to better explore and describe the role that central and local authorities play in the development, promotion and management of culture-based tourist products appear isolated – and they do not come from economists, either [Zeidler 2015; Mikos von Rohrscheidt 2017].

It is a different matter in the case of non-publicly owned heritage buildings and sites, whose owners are under regular pressure from all sides. They need to play a balancing act between the cultural objectives they would like to pursue, the legally binding and rigorous heritage conservation measures they need to apply, and any revenue generating activities that might ensure their financial survival. Additionally, just as well as any publicly-owned heritage building administrators, private heritage owners face constant tourists' demands for access, as well as popular expectations regarding the image, character and attractiveness of historical sites. Laws of supply and demand play a major role here, albeit academic literature on the subject remains limited and scattered across different disciplines, ranging from archaeology to architecture to sociology to economics [for examples see: Szmygin 2008; Czuba 2009; Gutowska and Kobylński 2011; Detloff 2015; Koskowski 2017].

It can be observed that heritage valuation is one of the most commonly explored aspects of heritage management in international literature. Along with it, the discourse surrounding the economic value of heritage has been ongoing in various parts of the world for several decades [see for instance: Lichfield 1988; Peacock 1995; Carman 2005; Smith 2006; Ashworth 2008]¹. In Poland, such studies are rather likely to focus on non-market related and non-use values, traditionally associated with public administration of heritage resources [Murzyn-Kupisz 2012]. There has been little input in the Polish heritage-related economic literature to the international academic debate famously stirred by Laurajane Smith in 2006, who openly criticised what she called an Authorised Heritage Discourse, i.e. a lingering conviction, shared by UNESCO, that heritage can be best evaluated and managed by experts and politicians [Smith 2006]. No significant Polish contribution has also been noted with regard to the role of communities in the context of heritage management and vice versa – perhaps reflecting the fact that Poland has neither ratified nor signed the 2005 Faro Convention² – although there was an attempt to highlight the issue [Kozioł et al. 2013].

As far as the use-value of heritage is concerned, it can be assumed that the matter was given international visibility at the time when the concept of ‘adaptation where appropriate of old buildings for new uses’ was embedded in the 1985 Granada Convention [Council of Europe 1985]. Notably, it has been paid much attention in the Anglo-Saxon literature, likely due to the specific heritage ownership situation in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, where majority of a particularly large stock of historical buildings remain a private property and as such they regularly hold various functions and are of diverse uses. Even in Ireland, however, the idea of *adaptive reuse* of built heritage was adopted as policy only in the second decade of the 21st c. [Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht 2012]. In Poland, where the processes of reprivatisation of publicly owned heritage assets begun in earnest only in 1989, the issue of heritage functions and uses attracted academic interest only towards the end of the first decade of the 21st c. [see for instance: Malawska 2007; Jaruzelska-Kastory 2008; Szymgin 2009]. This in part explains again the scarce literature on the subject.

There has been little or no Polish literature identified on issues such as visitor profiling and heritage market segmentation, heritage stakeholder liaison, ‘unwanted’ heritage management, heritage cost and benefit balances, heritage externalities, or heritage entrepreneurship.

Heritage management in Poland

Castle survey

Duties and responsibilities of heritage administrators, as one of the defining aspects of the system of heritage management in Poland, came to the attention of the author in the course of his already mentioned doctoral research project, completed at Newcastle University in 2013. As part of a comprehensive survey, castle administrators in Poland were asked to describe three of their most important duties with regard to the castle they were working at. The question returned a host of diverse responses. Content analysis made it possible to aggregate them into five distinctive categories, as shown in Fig. 1. The sixth, ‘Other’ category included singular activities mentioned by the respondents, such as supervising archaeology digs (other than regular archaeological projects), publishing (other than promotion and marketing), liaising with the local community, local and central

¹ For a broader view of the debate see Koskowski [2015].

² The Faro Convention is a common name for the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society, signed in 2005 in Faro, Portugal. As of February 2020, as many as 19 Council of Europe member countries have ratified the Convention.

authorities, and with other heritage sites, maintenance of a park and/or castle surroundings, occasional educational activities, and provision of ad hoc tourist information (other than regular visitor management).

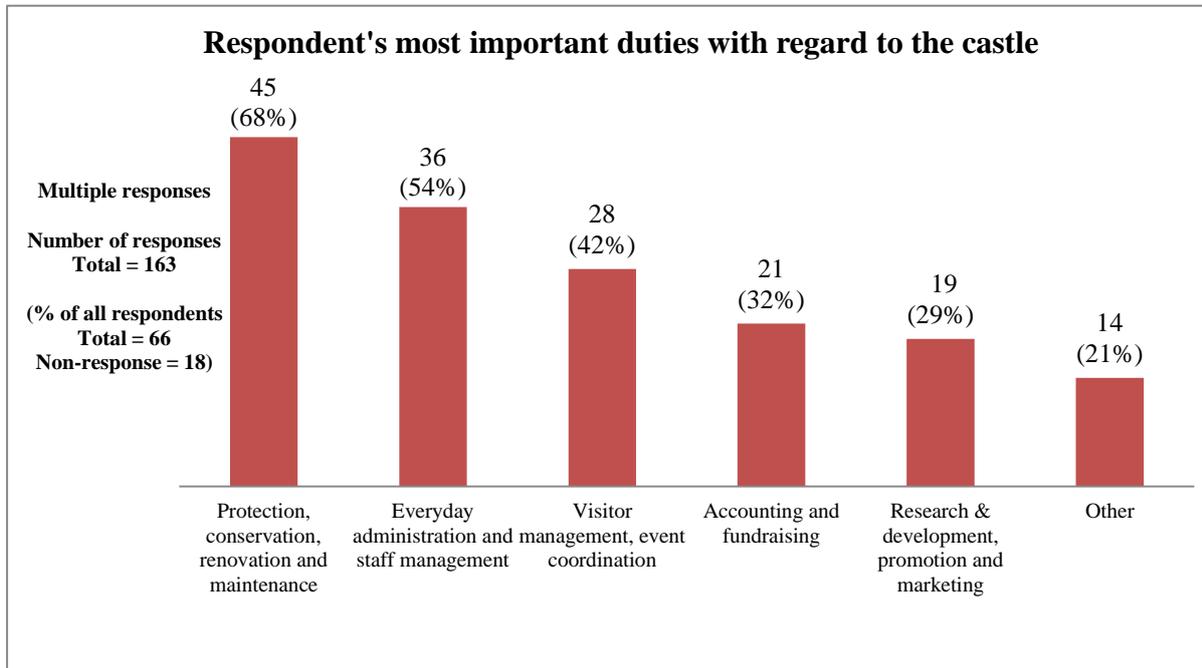


Fig. 1. Castle administrator's most important duties

Source: author's own compilation

Notably, most tasks mentioned by the respondents could be characterised as administrative but few as typically managerial activities. In fact, the observable lack of entrepreneurship and its consequences for castle administration in Poland became a distinguishing feature of the entire research project. Only ever would the enterprising spirit become noticeable in the case of those castles, which were privately or community owned.

Interestingly, the survey made it possible to distinguish between different ranks of respondents. The survey did not offer any preconceived administrative structure or job titles in order to capture as best as possible the everyday practice of castle management. Received responses were therefore divided into three discernible, custom-designed levels of responsibility: Rank 1 (55% of all respondents: director, main administrator, owner, CEO), Rank 2 (33% of all respondents: deputy director, administrator, curator, other senior manager), and Other (12% of all respondents: administrative assistant, secretary, junior employee, warden). It would not be possible to comment on the structure of castle management in Poland on the grounds of the above numbers only, however, in the course of the research project it became apparent that in majority of cases the surveys were indeed completed by the only person suitable for this task at a given castle. Soon it also transpired that the respondent's duties with regard to the castle varied, depending on their self-defined rank, as shown in Fig. 2.

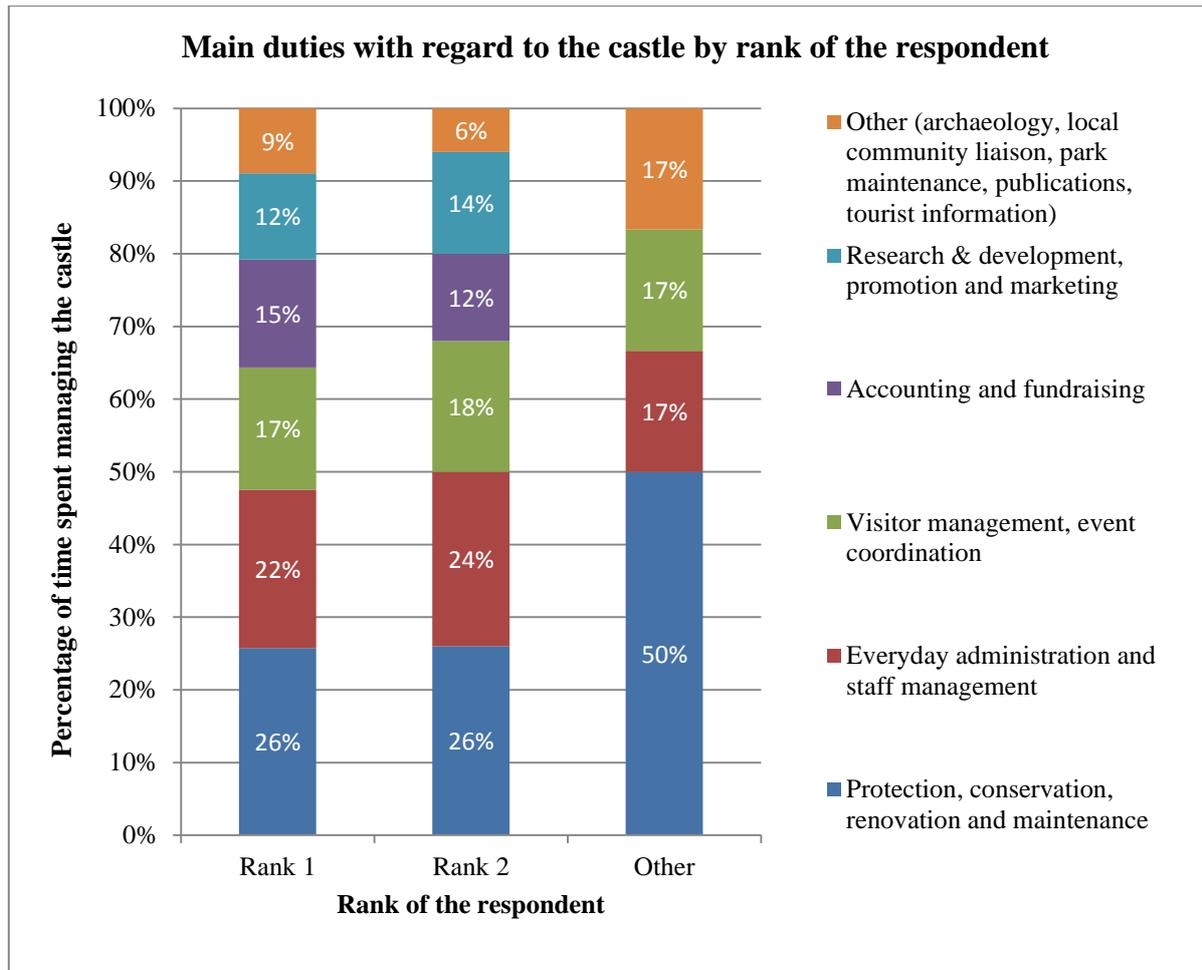


Fig. 2. Main duties depending on the rank of the respondent

Source: author's own compilation

Both the presented survey results and the recent interviews with castle administrators suggest that they are faced with an overwhelming variety of duties. In particular, it befalls persons holding top managerial positions within a given structure who share the most duties and also hold the greatest responsibility for the site and its preservation, for its collections, but also for its promotion and for the welfare of the visitors.

Personal observations and ethnographic study

The personal observations during site visits and conversations with heritage building owners, managers and administrators carried out in the year 2019 shed some new light on the earlier notes and assumptions. Every visited building and site was tidy and well-looked after, regardless of its ownership status. It has been confirmed that the number of visitors to the studied destinations has been rising, regardless of their nature, state of preservation and historical period. It has been cautiously noted by some interviewees, however, that tourists prefer to stay longer at sites that are better preserved and/or at least partially reconstructed. The tourist season typically begins in May and ends in September, with high season in August. Tourists are more likely to visit heritage destinations during events and there is a prevalent feeling among event organisers that visitors are primarily looking for entertainment and adventure, and less for education.

The *time travel* component of a visit seems to feature highly on the tourist agenda and it is generally understood that historical sites are expected to showcase items and customs

from the past, which can be helped by costumed interpretation and entertaining historical re-enactment. There is also a growing market for closed, special events for small groups, involving elements of *living history*. It would be wrong to assume, however, that historical building administrators are unreservedly happy to accept costumed re-enactment as the most preferred interpretational method. On the contrary, there is a sense of awareness of the, sometimes prohibitive, cost and effort associated with achieving high degree of historical accuracy in this respect. There is also some concern that costumed interpretation might offer an oversimplified picture of the past. This often results in a resolve to outsource this type of show to dedicated and experienced groups of re-enactors.

Interestingly, the growth of tourist interest has also been noted to cause some problems, mostly of technical and organisational nature. There are concerns that some sites are nearing their maximum capacity and that without significant investment the quality of visitor experience will deteriorate. Worryingly, the heritage administrators that were willing to discuss this matter admitted that they were not fully aware of the actual technical limitations of buildings in their care. At the same time, for purely economic reasons, there is general willingness to accept more tourists – and indeed most visited sites have the capacity to welcome more of them – despite very little insight about the characteristics of the existing visitors. Very few sites monitor in any way where their visitors come from or what they are looking for, and most administrative decisions are taken on the basis of anecdotal evidence and personal observations of experienced staff members.

Indeed, most of the approached heritage administrators are apprehensive about turning anyone away. There is a shared belief that it is very difficult to attract returning visitors, that there is a stiff competition of adventure parks, shopping malls and other modern attractions, and also that tourists are easily discouraged by high entry fees at cultural sites. This coincides with a study by Barełkowska [2009] who observed that the popular assumption that historical buildings are typically state property may indeed result in public demands for free access. At the same time most of the hosts feel obliged to make cultural assets accessible to the general public as part of their cultural mission. In consequence, most destinations visited in the course of this research have a very liberal fee policy and with few exceptions the cost of a single adult entry ticket rarely exceeds that of a moderately priced cup of coffee in a café.

Having noted that more visitors are almost always welcome, it is striking that none of the visited sites has recently undertaken any extensive promotional and marketing activities. Most efforts of marketing nature were limited to stands and banners within and around the property, and some very modest signage on the approach. It has been noted that the cost of appropriate road signage (brown signs indicating cultural sites) often has to be covered by the site itself, which is usually too much for its already stretched budget. Information about current activities is often scarce and, despite the fact that almost all the analysed sites operate a Facebook account, in some cases it is not up to date and the social media service is usually not very responsive.

Website analysis of the visited sites gave mixed results. It must be admitted that every heritage site analysed has some web presence, but the quality of its design varies greatly. Static and text-rich content prevails; interactivity is rare, and so is the compatibility of websites with smaller screens of portable devices. Just like any more sophisticated interpretation techniques, modern digital content requires additional financial resources, which the analysed sites do not have. On the other hand, managers who are aware of the possibilities offered by, for instance, Augmented Reality solutions, are often unconvinced that any of the like should be included in their own interpretative toolbox. Social media and web presence are necessary factors of success in the coming future, but it appears that advances in this area of heritage management in Poland would require a dedicated, more detailed study.

Conclusions

Heritage tourism is often regarded as a sub-category of cultural tourism, distinguished by a specific quest to experience the past or to 'feel part of the history of the place' [Timothy and Boyd 2003: 5]. It is important to note, however, that insofar as tourism is a leisurely activity it would be wrong to assume that visitors to a specific historic monument or site are motivated by only one objective. Regardless of the fact that many heritage tourists seek some kind of *time travel* or attempt to complete a personal list of monuments they have visited [Koskowski 2017], it is very likely that their entire trip involves other activities, many of which could be classed under a host of other tourism categories with which heritage tourism naturally overlaps, such as urban tourism, adventure tourism or even traditional mass tourism [Boyd 2008]. Hence, visitors to heritage sites often demonstrate a broad range of interests and behaviours, creating demand for a similarly broad range of services and experiences.

Authenticity and entertainment seem to be the two main features of cultural tourism quoted by the heritage management literature at the beginning of the 21st century. In practice, these two elements are not always compatible. Modern technologies and historical reconstruction offer attractive ways of visitor engagement, heritage presentation and interpretation, but heritage administrators hesitate to adopt them for a number of complex reasons yet to be studied more in depth. It should be remembered, however, that heritage tourism in particular is fuelled by the visitor's quest for authenticity. Moreover, it can be observed that a growing number of cultural and heritage tourists – it is tempting to call them 'premium' visitors – seek to turn away from technology-rich attractions and to break away from the role of mere spectators – expressed for instance by the growing demand for classic, personalised tours with professional guides [Chabiera et al. 2017].

In the absence of reliable, comprehensive official data, it can only be estimated that approximately 25% of all heritage buildings in Poland are currently a non-public – i.e. private or social/community – property [Koskowski 2015; Skalska and Koskowski 2017]. The figure is likely to grow slightly until it reaches the European average of approximately 30% of built heritage assets in private ownership [European Historic Houses 2011]. As already mentioned, despite some shared characteristics, different types of ownership can have a marked influence on the way a building or a site are managed, mainly due to the degree to which market forces play a role in its financing [Murzyn-Kupisz 2010; Obłąkowska-Kubiak 2014].

As expected, administrator duties depend on the functions of a site. Privately owned historical properties are more likely to have multiple uses, due to their necessary commercial activities. Regardless of the actual ownership status, however, the prevailing public assumption is that heritage buildings should be accessible to anyone, which is a legacy of decades of state ownership of almost entire heritage stock in Poland up to 1989. It could be argued that the general public lacks good understanding of the demands of heritage management, however the reverse is also often true.

It transpires from site visits, conversations and personal observations, carried out by the author in 2009 and in 2019, that the most effective business strategy for administrators of heritage buildings and sites in Poland so far has been to trust in one's passion for the job – it is by far the most distinctive characteristics shared by all the interviewees. Otherwise, most of the issues listed in Table 1. vary from site to site in their nature and intensity – it should be expected, therefore, that apart from general observations contained in the table, most solutions offered to heritage administrators should also be site-specific.

Table 1. Main management challenges for administrators of built heritage tourism destinations in Poland

INTERPRETATION	scholarly, old-fashioned, text-rich, hesitant to entertain need to open up to new technologies and recognise market demands
INFORMATION	scarce, out-of-date, passive, slow to respond need to adopt new standards and technologies
INTERACTION	stereotype-driven, stiffened by mutual demands and lack of understanding need to engage in a dialogue with the visitor
INNOVATION	conservative, hesitant to implement, unaware of alternatives need to explore new, out-of-the-box solutions

Source: author's own compilation

The article's focus has been on identifying the key challenges for heritage administrators in Poland in the first two decades of the 21st c. and it serves as a pilot study in this field. Table 1. is an attempt to summarise the early findings. The four categories outlined in the table reflect groups of issues that were most often raised by heritage administrators in their conversations with the author and observed during site visits. The ethnographic and explorative character of the study did not allow for a more methodical approach. One of the marked limitations of the project carried out at the Warsaw School of Economics in 2019 has been its restricted replicability and the resulting difficulty to perform comparative analysis of the studied heritage sites. It is suggested that any more in-depth future study of the subject is guided by a set of more structured research methods. It would also benefit any recommendations that could be offered to heritage administrators as a result, increasing the applicability value of the project.

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