

Changing Visions of Heritage Value What Role Should the Experts Play?

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Article abstract

The author of this paper questions the role of the experts in heritage policies and practices. Is the voice of the heritage expert now guided by the *vox populi*? The current evidence for these trends, long considered anathema to heritage purists, suggests that an epoch-making change in heritage practice is now underway. The announcement of a Memorandum of Understanding between the World Bank and UNESCO to provide “very positive input for the improvement of aid effectiveness, and make the most of culture as a motor for social development and poverty alleviation, through employment and job creation” and the theme of the 17th ICOMOS General Assembly, “Heritage, a Driver of Development” are both clear indications of a pressing new concern: that heritage contribute to the economic – not only cultural – well-being of contemporary society. No less significant is the emphasis on public rights and responsibilities in the formulation of heritage policy, once the exclusive prerogative of antiquarians and professional conservators. This turn to the public as full-fledged heritage stakeholders is expressed clearly by the Council of Europe’s Framework *Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (2005) and the efforts of UNESCO to promote the active participation – and economic advancement – of traditional practitioners of intangible cultural heritage.

CHANGING VISIONS OF HERITAGE VALUE

What Role Should the Experts Play?

Neil Silberman

ICOMOS – ICIP

Are the aims of heritage conservation and commerce converging? Is the voice of the heritage expert now guided by the *vox populi*? The current evidence for these trends, long considered anathema to heritage purists (e.g. Petzet, 2010), suggests that an epoch-making change in heritage practice is now underway. The announcement of a Memorandum of Understanding between the World Bank and UNESCO to provide “very positive input for the improvement of aid effectiveness, and make the most of culture as a motor for social development and poverty alleviation, through employment and job creation” (UNESCOPRESS, 2009) and the theme of the 17th ICOMOS General Assembly, “Heritage, a Driver of Development” (Mouton, 2013) are both clear indications of a pressing new concern: that heritage contribute to the economic—not only cultural—well-being of contemporary society. No less significant is the emphasis on public rights and responsibilities in the formulation of heritage policy, once the exclusive prerogative of antiquarians and professional conservators. This turn to the public as full-fledged heritage stakeholders is expressed clearly by the Council of Europe’s *Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society* (2005) and the efforts of UNESCO to promote the active participation—and economic advancement—of traditional practitioners of intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO Media Services, 2013).

Economic development was certainly not among the original motivations for the 19th century historic preservation and folklore documentation movements (Jokilehto, 1999; Bendix, 1997). Both were aesthetic-ideological reactions to the rise of modern industrial society (Matsuda, 1996). At a time when life had increasingly become a series of anonymous monetary transactions and mass immigration from farms to factories threatened time-honored lifeways and social relations, an

appeal to tradition through the monuments and memories sought to restore some measure of social harmony. Since—or so it seemed to cultural elites in Europe and North America—that stable historical standards of significance and value were needed, a professional class of experts and administrators was empowered to establish the chronological and stylistic criteria for the kinds of cultural remnants and relics that needed to be saved (Jokilehto, 1999: chapters 4-8). Seeing themselves as the saviors of national and civilizational tradition, the early professional conservators of both tangible and intangible heritage assumed the public responsibility to discover, document, and honor the legacies of pre-modern eras, be they architectural monuments, art objects, regional dialects, *völkisch* costumes, dances, or fairy tales (among many sources: Ashurst, 2007, Bendix, 1997). Those identified heritage elements became modernity's symbolic "other" and in the sense that modernity was perceived to be all about change and movement, those antithetical, premodern heritage elements were endowed with the seeming quality of permanence and timelessness.

In the 19th and most of the 20th century, public participation in heritage was considered best when passive; the unchanging, elite values of each nation's cultural heritage were seen as a cultural vitamin that would enhance the citizen's patriotism or cultural literacy (e.g. Dietler, 1994; West, 1999; Glassberg, 1990). The distinction between high and low culture was clear and inviolable; the cultural experts, empowered by increasingly complex bureaucracies and cultural institutions guarded the borders and determined the priorities (Levine, 1988). Yet with the economic and social disruptions of the 1960s and the rise of history "from-the-bottom-up," culture was recognized a legitimate political battlefield, not a fact of nature that had only one correct and authoritative reality (Starn, 2002). The 1972 World Heritage Convention adopted a universalizing, global perspective, yet minority and indigenous communities in former colonial societies began to associate the right to designate and control their own heritage places as a demonstration of political legitimacy (Smith, 2006).

Indeed the celebration and protection of the diversity of cultural heritage—rather than the acceptance of a single eurocentric heritage standard—became a token of faith (Ashworth, Graham and Tunbridge, 2007). Following the lead of the environmental movement in instilling the value of biological diversity in the public consciousness, the protectors of cultural diversity—through varying notions of "authenticity" (Larsen, 1995) and the formalization of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004)—similarly impressed upon the international development

community the socio-economic value of preserving a wide range of regional and even local variants of cultural heritage (Bandarin, Hosagrahar and Albernaz, 2011). And just as biological diversity was promoted not as an abstract value but the source of as yet undiscovered pharmaceuticals and the precondition for the “sustainable” human exploitation of the environment, so too did culture and its tangible and intangible expressions become seen as the medium for “sustainable” social development and a cornucopia of economically valuable places, commodities, and events. Far from being hermetically sealed from the present, the legacies of the past have now become a preoccupation of contemporary society, in its quest to deal with change, sustainability, and the enhancement of human welfare (Labadi and Long, 2010; Licciardi and Amirtahmasebi, 2012; Barthel-Bouchier, 2012; Galla, 2013).

Do heritage experts have enough expertise?

So what is the proper role of heritage professionals in a world of globalization, identity politics, and economic development priorities? I would argue that despite the heritage community’s current rhetorical turn toward the goals of environmental sustainability, regional economic development, poverty alleviation, social cohesion, and urban regeneration, the heart and soul of heritage practice remains firmly wedded to the far less instrumental, humanistic disciplines of aesthetics and historiography (e.g. Petzet, 2010). While the sentiment of cultural heritage professionals contributing to and even driving the improvement of public welfare is noble, much needs to be done to equip a new generation of heritage professionals with the complex expertise in development economics, community engagement, and regional planning that a slogan like “heritage as a driver of development” requires (Diduck, 1999). The simple fact is that most existing heritage laws, conventions, and charters standing at the very core of heritage conservation and management deal with formal categories of significance and states of physical preservation, not wider economic, social, or political aims (Blake, 2000). Likewise, most university conservation curricula and professional training deal with conservation science, architectural and archaeological site management, and interpretation, with, at most, only a brief introduction to development theory, urban studies, or community economic policy (Avrami, Mason and de la Torre, 2000).

There are still some in the heritage profession who see the current socio-economic and public-engagement preoccupations as little more than a destructive fad. As former ICOMOS President Michael Petzet put it with

characteristic bluntness:

Values are here now dominated by those *previously unrecognized stakeholder communities* [italics in the original], minority groups, aborigines, unspecialised professionals etc., who somehow will take care that heritage is subsumed *into a process that is inherently dynamic by responding directly and constantly to the evolving needs of society at any given time*. Obviously, it is accepted that in this wonderfully dynamic process the classic values of conservation will perish in no time and that “managing change” will replace the efforts to save our cultural heritage. (Petzet, 2010: 9)

That is the reason why heritage conservationists and private sector interests have traditionally been implacable foes (Van Oers 2008). But here is precisely the paradox before us: conservation (i.e. “saving our cultural heritage”), on which the structure of the officialized heritage is based, is identified with *resisting* change, while change is the primary *object* of the socio-economic development embraced by a growing number of heritage professionals. And this paradox is not simply theoretical but poses a serious challenge to the future role of cultural heritage within society. On the international and national levels, the traditional forms and structures of heritage conservation (or “safeguarding” for intangible heritage) remain intact, with specially trained and officially qualified experts 1.) adopting universal criteria for significance and value; 2.) categorizing and studying the physical types; 3.) creating inventories of specific vessels of significance and value; 4.) establishing guidelines and codes of protection, and 5.) protecting the extant physical manifestations that are recognized as “authentic” or expressive of traditional values from transformatory change. Yet tolerance for and even encouragement of far-reaching change lies at the heart of the new development imperative (Araoz, 2011). Indeed the idea of “heritage and development” is seen by its supporters not only as a necessary matter of social relevance for the heritage profession but—no less important—as a source of funding ambitious heritage initiatives at a time when governments are slashing their culture budgets and when traditional subventions from private and corporate philanthropy are harder than ever to find (Borwick and Bacon, 2012).

So the market—not collective memory, not *ars gratia artis*—has become the mechanism on which the promotion of cultural heritage conservation increasingly depends. On the one hand there are those who believe that heritage professionals should never compromise with market forces, even if a commitment to defending unchanging values against the “creative

destruction” of the neoliberal global economy proves to be a disastrously quixotic strategy (Cowen, 2002). On the other hand there are those heritage professionals who see collaboration with development agencies and organizations to be of great mutual benefit, without precisely documenting or even articulating what measurable benefits they bring (Silberman, 2013; Labadi, 2008). Following the model of the 2009 Memorandum of Understanding between UNESCO and the World Bank, some heritage professionals envision their skills and expertise as an underutilized resource to bring prosperity, pride, and a higher quality of life to inhabitants of neighborhoods, cities and regions (e.g. Hampton, 2005; Feltault, 2006). Likewise, venture capitalists, consultants, and planners see cultural heritage as a base for “city branding,” “attraction creation,” and inner-city real estate booms (Rypkema, 2012; Misiura, 2006).

But can either reliably provide what they promise? Here we come to some central questions of cause and effect. The assumption that heritage can be an effective driver of local and regional development; that it can make a meaningful contribution to the challenge of poverty reduction; and that it can regularly and reliably help rejuvenate declining communities and heal serious social fractures is an ambitious, utopian ideal that in its very instrumentality profoundly changes what cultural heritage *is*. The economics of heritage is a field fraught with uncertainties and disagreements about even the most basic methods of valuation (Mason, 2008); the term “Cultural Capital” is itself an import of market-based calculations of investment and return (Throsby, 1999). In terms of urban regeneration, the proportional share in benefits of development projects by various classes of investors and stakeholders is problematic, if not grossly unequal (Porter and Shaw, 2013). Sustainable tourism remains a subjectively defined watchword whose real value in jobs and stimulation of the local economy often disrupts or disappoints those whose lives it promised to improve (Caserta and Russo, 2002). And while the problem of gentrification may dramatically raise real estate values, the social cost of those rises in broken lives, demographic replacement, and social disruption remains uncalculated even in monetary terms (Herzfeld, 2010).

What we have is a continually widening range of tangible and intangible *heritage*, *patrimoine*, *patrimonio*, *erfgoed* and *erbgut* transformed from an essentially embodied object of cultural significance to a marketable commodity whose value lies at least partially in how well its exploitation stimulates a faster circulation of money in certain sectors of the community. Commodification is not in itself necessarily bad and in some cases can be

a vehicle of agency and cultural assertion (Ertman and Williams, 2005). Thus, it is a fateful instrumental decision for the future of development-oriented heritage which sites will be chosen as objects for investment and which will be resigned to neglect and oblivion, judged by their relevance for socio-economic development. If we wholeheartedly accept the definition of heritage as “Cultural Capital” and its goal to serve as an engine of regional and urban development, wouldn’t free market logic suggest that we concentrate on protecting and promoting the heritage that offers the greatest return? Or shall we search for a new path that avoids a binary approach—and the associated zero-sum conflicts—between those who consider cultural heritage to be the private preserve of connoisseur experts and those who see heritage elements as exploitable resources whose value can be measured only in monetary gain?

Are we to accept the wisdom of investment in potentially profitable cultural tourist attractions while neglecting a more balanced (yet increasingly de-funded) public policy of long-term conservation of the entire range of heritage resources? And if only some heritage resources prove useful for economic development, what shall be done with the rest? Shall the imperatives of development require the triumph of attractive, visitor-attracting nostalgia over historical reflection? And if local communities, minorities, and indigenous groups are encouraged to promote their own heritage for socio-economic reasons, are they not susceptible to the same culturally corrosive marketing urge (Butler and Hinch, 2007)?

These are some of the problematic questions to be asked, not ignored, by heritage professionals who recognize the inevitability of engaging in the globalized realities of the 21st century. Before signing MOUs or participating in regional planning initiatives, today’s heritage professionals must, first of all, have the expertise to identify and assess various heritage-related development processes, whom precisely they benefit, and whether they reinforce or undermine a community’s ontological security (Grenville, 2007). Are we speaking only of economic revitalization, in which the generation of revenue, numbers of jobs created, and overall increase in economic activity are the benchmarks of success? Or are we talking about the much quoted goal of “social cohesion”? How can we define it? How can we measure it? How can we establish there is even a link? (Perkin, 2010) The answer is neither simple nor automatic to any of these questions. In fact—to the simplest and most commonly repeated assertion that heritage enhances local identity and pride, a recent report by the Heritage Lottery Fund in Great Britain suggests that while active volunteers in local

heritage projects feel a personal satisfaction in this work, their personal connection to the community actually becomes less, not more committed, after dealing face to face with historical misconceptions and mass-market cultural preferences of their neighbors (Clark 2006). Shall we allow our own misconceptions of cultural diversity at the everyday level and wishful thinking about the general economic benefits determine the focus of our professional efforts to safeguard tangible and intangible heritage?

The challenge of remembering forward

Cultural Heritage is, almost by definition, the tangible and intangible remains of urban and rural cultures that may still be honored, but are no longer the dominant ones. Regional declines and transformations are caused by changing economic and social conditions, shifting technologies of manufacture, agricultural production, services, and trade. In many parts of the world, the disintegration of subsistence farming in the face of industrialization and urbanization has given rise to both rural depopulation and the crowded, poor quarters of cities—often historic quarters—by new waves of rural and foreign immigrants (for one example among many, Dinçer, 2011). Heritage can only help change the status of a region if it contributes to bringing it from a peripheral status into the mainstream of the present global economy. But if heritage is used as a mechanism for modernization, can it really be considered heritage at all? The cruel irony is that the problem of urban and rural deterioration will not be solved by declaring decimated areas cultural landscapes or inner cities as prime targets for rehabilitation, but rather by recognizing and trying to understand the structural, historical conditions that have caused the decline in the first place and working with local communities to avert or at least soften regional development's often destructive cultural effects.

Indeed an increasing number of international development agencies, the World Bank among them have recognized that “culture matters,” (Da Costa, 2010), especially in the wake of the enormous demographic dislocation and social fragmentation caused by the mega-projects of the 20th century. They have recognized the great mistake in assuming that central planning and physical rehabilitation of heritage landmarks, monuments, and historic centers can uniformly and successfully contribute to the process of “development” without enormous social dislocation and heritage loss. Gentrification, commercialization, transfer, or emigration of traditional populations—in fact many of the elements that work against the cause of cultural heritage as a common inheritance—are

all too often the result of centrally planned development schemes (Scott, 1998). Heritage development may indeed help to maintain the superficial visual presence of ancient or traditional cultures, but if the process of development completely transforms its economic and social foundations and excludes or ignores the rights of “non-modern” or “undocumented” populations, it may exacerbate, rather than reduce, the growing social divide between ethnic groups, religious communities, rich and poor—in rural areas and in city centers alike.

When ICOMOS President Gustavo Araoz issued his call for “tolerance for change” (Araoz, 2011) that evoked such a hostile reaction from traditionalist circles in the ICOMOS community, he was accused of counteracting “the core ideology of our organization,” since, as his predecessor asserted, “conservation does not mean ‘managing change’ but preserving—preserving, not altering and destroying: ICOMOS, the only global international organization for the conservation of monuments and sites, is certainly not the International Council on Managing Change.” (Petzet, 2010: 7) But in fact, that is the 21st century reality, not only for ICOMOS, but for the heritage profession as a whole. What does preserving tangible heritage mean when public funds to support strict conservation are being catastrophically restricted, and the areas with monuments, architectural ensembles, and cultural landscapes most in need of conservation are precisely places where economic downturn, illegal immigration, poverty, agricultural decline, or deindustrialization are also the most severe? How can we realistically rely on the assumption that public or private investment poured into these areas to conserve their architecture or to present their archaeological sites to cultural tourists will in fact prevent the social reactions and dislocations that will render the commemoration of these monuments just another entertainment venue or themed upscale residential development? (Silberman, 2007) That is why I think Araoz’s soul searching is so important, to reinvent—yes reinvent the field of public heritage as a revival of peoples’ sense of belonging and participation in a living cultural community, not just the preservation or safeguarding of symbolic heritage elements. But that requires something other than the two diametrically opposed alternatives of “fight development at any cost” or “development is our new rationale.”

The heritage profession must reflect deeply and seriously before transforming itself into an instrument of top-down social engineering on a global scale. That applies equally to those who seek to perpetuate intolerance for any change whatsoever, or those who incautiously accept

participation in development actions—in the standard frameworks of commodification and infrastructural investment—that may radically devalue the creative, cultural possibilities of heritage conservation and interpretation as a shared public activity. New factors of globalization, mass migration, and sub-national identity politics have dramatically undermined traditional, essentialized criteria of “significance,” “authenticity,” and “place” and have led to new emphases on local, relational construction of collective memory in whatever (changing) form it may take (Gracia, 2003)—and community empowerment that facilitates a wide range of locally based social, cultural, and economic activities (cf. Ruiz-Ballesteros and Hernandez-Ramirez, 2010). These do not depend on the delineation of heritage “properties” as tourist destinations or the public perception of the past as a “visitor experience.”

The question to be confronted urgently at this crucial moment is not to discover more effective techniques to confront the forces of development or to collaborate with them as “drivers.” It is, I believe, rather more important to reassess the socio-economic value we place on the historical landscape and intangible traditions as the basis for community well-being, whether that community is local and fixed, or a diaspora scattered across the world (Gustafson, 2001). Unless we seek to understand what kinds of basic changes are now occurring to the very concept of heritage, we will never understand what is being lost or what is being gained. There can be no return to the age of high culture and the public funds to support it. Yet we must resist an uncritical acceptance of what I have elsewhere called a discourse of development, a seductive folktale, in which the well-intentioned technocrat plays the hero who shields the economic assertions about the value of heritage from deeper scrutiny (Silberman, 2013). And we must avoid at all costs helping to construct a brave new world in which cultural heritage—far from being a driver of development is just an exploitable object in an unceasing search for expansion and profit. For in that world, economics will become the principle driver, creator, and shaper of what we, our children, and grandchildren will learn to identify as “Heritage.”

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