

HERITAGE AS A DRIVER OF DEVELOPMENT? SOME QUESTIONS OF CAUSE AND EFFECT

Neil Silberman

*University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA
nasilber@anthro.umass.edu*

Despite its rhetorical turn toward goals of sustainability, regional development, public investment, and economic planning, the heart and soul of heritage conservation practice, it will be argued, remains firmly wedded to aesthetics, collective memory, and culture-history. Whether this theoretical orientation enhances the effectiveness or even the qualifications of heritage professionals to assist in the process of contemporary socio-economic development is a central question that must be asked by the participants in the symposium. This paper will argue that the current turn to “development” as a rationale for heritage conservation must be regarded with utmost caution. Its outcomes are uncertain; its benefits are more often asserted than proved. Moreover, the calls to recruit members of the cultural heritage profession as participants in modern social engineering and economic reorganization projects pose a potential conflict with the discipline’s traditional humanistic goals.

The assumption that heritage can be a driver of local and regional development; that it can be an effective instrument in the challenge of poverty reduction; and that it can serve to rejuvenate declining communities and heal serious social fractures requires an enormous leap of faith. The economics of heritage is a field fraught with uncertainties and disagreements (Peacock and Rizzo 2008). Reliable, cross-cultural empirical data is hard to come by. The proportional share in benefits by various classes of investors and stakeholders is far from clear. Moreover, conservation professionals are not trained in the social sciences and are often unqualified to assess the merits of a particular development project in which they are called to take part. If the intention of this symposium is to offer examples of specific projects where the valorization of heritage resources has yielded benefits to specific communities, we must ask basic questions of generalizability, context, costs, equitable distribution of profits, and mechanisms of cause and effect. Even in cases of verifiable success, we must closely examine the impact of intensifying capital investment, infrastructural modernization, and revenue generation on the social role of heritage for all strata of society. In such an examination, the following questions posed by the

symposium’s organizers are thus particularly pertinent:

1. “What type of heritage is most relevant for socio-economic development?”

Shall we wholeheartedly accept the definition of heritage as “Cultural Capital” (Throsby 2003) and the subsequent attempts at specific heritage valuation as the necessary and perhaps inevitable steps toward its commodification and the generation of revenue? Or shall we resist, when appropriate, entrepreneurial economics and reconnect with local communities, in the words of the Venice Charter to “regard ancient monuments as a common heritage” (not selectively exploited resources) and recognize “the common responsibility to safeguard them for future generations,” handing “them on in the full richness of their authenticity.” Are we to accept the wisdom of investment in potentially profitable cultural tourist attractions while neglecting a more balanced policy of long-term conservation of the entire range of heritage resources? And if only some heritage resources prove useful for this kind of heritage development, what shall be done with the rest?

2. “In what ways can Heritage revitalize regional development?”

To answer this question we must identify what process of “development” we are talking about and whether it meshes with ICOMOS’s objective of “furthering the conservation, protection, rehabilitation, and enhancement of monuments, groups of buildings and sites.” 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?

But those benchmarks are often undifferentiated as to the equitable distribution of benefits (Labadi 2008). And what of the goal of “social cohesion”? How can we define it? How can we measure it? How can we establish there is a link? Shall we allow such vaguely defined socio-economic objectives determine the focus of our professional efforts to safeguard tangible and intangible heritage?

3. “What can Heritage do against urban and rural decline?”

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 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. 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? Isn't it merely an investment strategy for raising property values or creating income-generating cultural tourism destinations with uncertain social results? The cruel irony is that the problem of urban and rural deterioration will not be solved by declaring decimated areas as cultural landscapes or inner cities as prime targets for rehabilitation, but rather by recognizing 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.

4. “What concrete guidelines should be suggested regarding urban and rural development?”

An increasing number of prominent development theorists have recognized that local community and culture matter, especially in the wake of the enormous demographic dislocation and social fragmentation caused by the mega-projects of the last century (e.g. Cernea 1991). Though the rule of development experts will undoubtedly continue, it will be a great mistake to assume that central planning and physical rehabilitation of heritage landmarks, monuments, and sites can uniformly and successfully contribute to the process of “modernization” 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 (Russo 2002).

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 of the society and excludes or ignores the rights of “non-modern” or “undocumented” immigrant populations, it may exacerbate, rather than reduce, the growing social divide between rich and poor—in rural areas and in city centers alike.

All of these questions suggest that the heritage profession must reflect deeply and seriously before transforming itself into an instrument of top-down social engineering on a global scale. This paper will discuss how incautious development actions—in the standard frameworks of commodification and infrastructural investment—may radically devalue the creative, cultural possibilities of heritage conservation and interpretation as a public activity. It will survey how new factors of globalization, mass migration, and sub-national identity politics have dramatically undermined traditional criteria of “significance,” “authenticity,” and “place” and have led to new emphases on local, relational construction of collective memory—and the community empowerment that facilitates a wide range of social, cultural, and economic activities. These do not depend on the commodification of heritage “properties” as tourist destinations or the public perception of the past as a “visitor experience.” Examples from the Pacific, the Caribbean, and the Middle East—as well as from Western Europe and North America—will be used to bolster the argument that the new rhetoric of heritage as a tool of socio-economic development is neither verifiably successful on its own terms nor true to the ideals on which the public appreciation of both tangible and intangible heritage is based.

The question to be confronted urgently at this crucial moment in the history of ICOMOS and the wider heritage conservation movement is not “Heritage as a Driver of Development?” but whether we are instead entering a brave new world in which international and regional development bureaucracies will become the drivers of what we will learn to identify as “Heritage.”

References

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