

Conservation and heritage as future-making

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Conservation in context

Many voices have been heard publically condemning the Islamic State's on-going destruction of archaeological artefacts and sites in contemporary Syria and elsewhere. Undoubtedly, graves have been looted, buildings dynamited and museum displays demolished, sometimes in front of the eyes of the international community.

Many have suggested that there is an urgent need to protect and preserve this cultural heritage for the future. Behind such calls lies the conservation paradigm of heritage, motivated by a strong conservation ethics (Holtorf 2014). According to this logic, the heritage sector has the duty to conserve the most valuable parts of our cultural heritage because it has inherent value and constitutes a non-renewable resource that cannot be substituted and must, therefore, be preserved for the benefit of future generations.

The UNESCO World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 1972), for example, speaks of “the duty of ensuring the identification, protection, conservation, presentation and transmission to future generations of the cultural and natural heritage.” This duty is a consequence of the view that “the cultural heritage and the natural heritage are increasingly threatened with destruction”, “the magnitude and gravity of the new dangers threatening them,” and the judgment that the “deterioration or disappearance of any item of the cultural or natural heritage constitutes a harmful impoverishment of the heritage of all the nations of the world.”

To see heritage as an irreplaceable resource and in terms of endangerment, risk of irreversible extinction, and consequently in need of urgent protection is not, however, self-evident but culturally and historically situated in a particular context. Since the nineteenth century, Western societies, despite the modern fetishization of innovation, have been almost obsessed with preserving objects of the past as cultural heritage, both through society's

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institutions and legislation and through citizens' own initiatives (Lowenthal 1996; Harrison 2013). Arguably, the lure of a heritage to be conserved now outpaces all other modes of relating to the past including tradition, memory, myth, memoir and history (Lowenthal 1996). Archaeologist and heritage professional Graham Fairclough (2009, 158) even added that

[t]he obsession with physical conservation became so embedded in twentieth century mentalities that it is no longer easy to separate an attempt to understand the past and its meaning from agonising about which bits of it to protect and keep. It is almost as if one is not allowed to be interested in the past without wanting to keep or restore ... the remains of the past, which seem to exist only to be preserved. The wide range of how the past is used by society has been reduced to the literal act of preserving its fabric.

Behind this trend and our deep longing for retaining the heritage in the face of a variety of threats of destruction lies what has been described as a general human preference for loss aversion further strengthened by a modern cult of heritage and 'Noah complex' (Holtorf 2012, 2015). Adopting an 'endangerment sensibility,' modern societies perceive the future first and foremost in terms of risks and threats to what its members hold dear and prefer to preserve for their own descendants. We are therefore called upon to protect species faced by extinction; to conserve threatened biodiversity; preserve heritage 'at risk'; and ultimately to save humanity from ruining its own planet and thus from inescapable doom.

Conservation as change

The logic of the conservation paradigm ignores that natural and historic processes of change and transformation are the origin and driver of human civilization and heritage on Earth, not their enemy. In his book *Inheritors of the Earth. How Nature is Thriving in an Age of Extinction*, biologist Chris D. Thomas (2017) argues heretically that the future of natural heritage may just as well turn out much more brightly than what many of us pessimistically assume. "It is entirely possible", he concludes (2017: 243), "that the long-term consequence of the evolution of *Homo sapiens* will be to increase the number of species on the Earth's land surface." Thomas suggests that we should embrace immigrant species, hybrid species and species created by humans, e.g. by selective breeding. Time will tell which of these are best adapted to the rapidly changing conditions on Earth but, to be sure, the number of species in most regions of the world is increasing, not decreasing. Climate change in particular will contribute to thriving wildlife, because, as Thomas establishes (2017: 92), "on the whole, more species like it hot than cold." The key difference in Thomas' thinking compared to that

of others is that he proposes that we work *with* the biological and environmental processes as they are taking place today, not *against* them. He knows: “Life on Earth survives because it changes” (2017: 203).

Along similar lines, human geographer Stephanie Lavau (2015: 124-126) observed that the nature of conservation, and in particular strategies to deal with climate change, are presently changing. The ambition to maintain a timeless continuity of existing forms of life in protective fortresses is giving way to the aim of supporting a more fluid continuity of ecological processes by providing possibilities for future ecosystems. Whereas, for Lavau, ‘fortress conservation’ manifests a nostalgic longing for the past, not seldom evoking grief and regret about any loss or destruction, ‘fluid conservation’ allows for heritage to prepare legacies for the future as it might possibly be, drawing on human vision and hope. Such living heritage testifies and, at the same time, takes advantage of change over time.

Conservation of cultural heritage, too, means to accept and testify of on-going change, not to prevent it. All human beings have ever done, and do now, is part of human history. Although historical change means that things are different today than they were before, as in any period, all human actions necessarily contribute to the human legacy rather than risk threatening it. Cultural heritage, just like natural heritage, is a continuously evolving process, not a legacy that was in any way complete. As a result of rapid global change and transformation in present societies, the cultural heritage is growing rapidly, not shrinking, and its diversity is likely to be increasing, not decreasing. Even destruction and loss are not necessarily threats to heritage; in fact, they may make heritage. Never have the Bamiyan Buddha statues, the Berlin Wall, the Dodo and Tyrannosaurus Rex been more emblematic than since they had largely or entirely disappeared from the surface of the planet! As I argued elsewhere, in some cases, less conservation may nevertheless mean more memory (Holtorf 2006).

In other words, both natural and cultural heritage are dynamic manifestations of change over time, not its victims. In order to connect what is done to heritage in the contemporary world with the benefits of heritage for future generations, we ought to see heritage in terms of persistence and change, persevering in a process of continuous growth and creative transformation over time (Holtorf 2015, Kimball 2016). This approach is closely linked to the process-thinking recently proposed by ICOMOS Vice-President Toshiyuki Kono (n.d.) in the context of resolving the ‘heritage conservation versus development’ conundrum and with the express aim of forming a basis of a new approach for sustainable development.

The future does not have to be perceived in terms of risks and threats to original and irreplaceable heritage but can also be considered as a process of continuing transformation and change which we cannot always steer but to which we can adapt and which holds not only risks but also opportunities for what we have inherited from the past. Arguably, it is precisely human adaptability and the continuing renewal of values and stories associated with sites and objects in the landscape that makes the continuity of human communities and their cultural heritage sustainable in the long term (Avrami 2016). This logic of continuous heritage transformation has long been apparent for intangible heritage. It applies equally to tangible heritage.

Bruno Latour and Adam Lowe (2011: 278-9) employed an interesting natural metaphor in a recent discussion of the aura of facsimiles. Adapting and extending their river imagery from the world of art works to that of heritage, I suggest that we should not be looking for linear rivers (of heritage) expected to be flowing from a single spring (its origin) towards the sea where the river ends, constantly at risk of being stopped by a dam or drying out along the way. Instead, we need to recall that rivers have extensive catchment areas, meanders, rapids, estuaries and large deltas. Rivers also often join up with other flows of water and get rained into. The question is not whether or not any water in the river system reliably derives from a particular source and makes its way to its destination. The question is rather which waters the river subsumes, where and how the water flows, and how much fertile ground it can create. In other words, the river should inspire us, to judge its waters on their own merits, at any point along the stream, rather than those of their origin and destination. Surely, a monument like, for example, Stonehenge gains some of its aura and significance as heritage from the various interpretations, uses, and interferences it was subjected to during its long history. Episodes of heritage destruction may contribute to future-making too.

The most important question is not how much heritage of any one period may or may not survive into the future but what legacy, which we construct and leave behind, will come to benefit future generations the most. As far as the devastating impact of wars and other forms of destruction are concerned, the specific heritage may be changing fast and thoroughly but it is not as such 'at risk'. Ironically, even the destruction of parts of the existing cultural heritage may contribute to future generations' relations to the past by effectively creating new heritage. A changing heritage manifests the upgrading of history to the latest version, as it were.

Conservation as construction

Does heritage, then, need to be managed at all? Yes it does, because heritage is expected to provide benefits for people and this means that it has to be regularly upgraded too. Although we may not be able to predict the future in any great detail, heritage management should, therefore, be future-proofed to the extent we can. That does not necessarily mean that we need to engage in a great deal of speculation. We can discern some demographic, technological, economic, social and environmental trends for the next couple of decades, if not longer, that we may as well prepare for. To the extent that the future will take turns we do not expect now, we can design strategies of action that would work for a range of various different scenarios of the future. Finally, we can more actively integrate future change in heritage management and thus accept the temporality of specific heritage discourses, for example by letting more of our decisions “expire” at specific points in the future. Perhaps the only perception of the future about which we can be firmly certain that it should be avoided, is that the future will largely resemble the present – and yet that kind of presentism is precisely what heritage managers in practice usually start out with. Very few heritage specialists have given much concern to the question which future they actually work for and what the exact benefits of heritage in that future may consist of (Holtorf and Högberg 2014, Högberg et al 2017).

Preferences for altering heritage in the present, deriving from how people prefer to relate and give value and meaning to the past, are often highly variable. The conservation of heritage covers only a small section of the multiple ways in which the past is evoked and gains significance in contemporary societies. In considering the future of any heritage site, we are well advised to consider thoroughly the potential of various other modes of relating to the past besides conservation and reconstruction. That particular mode is of special importance because it is part of the planning process, governed by public policy, managed by civil servants, supported by relevant legislation and to some extent publically funded. We need to make sure that we manage the cultural heritage with the best outcomes for the future as possible.

Ruined buildings and damaged heritage can be a very powerful force in society, and, as we have seen, not all destroyed heritage needs to be restored to retain or enhance its values and meanings. At the same time, entirely reconstructed and reimagined heritage can have significant benefits in society, too. As products of the imagination, any contemporary creations may not easily attract a UNESCO World Heritage designation but that is not the

point. I suggest that what matters is mostly what UNESCO's heritage initiatives can do to critically support and develop heritage that is significant to people in the present, and to a much lesser extent what people can do to attract UNESCO's award of a World Heritage label.

In relation to Syria and elsewhere we should be asking today about the most appropriate strategy of heritage management for creating benefits for future generations: can devastated places and cities contain a heritage in the making? Does the loss of past remains imply the chance for a new heritage guiding the region into the future? Or can carefully designed reconstructions, whether physical or virtual, make an important contribution to recovery after an episode of extensive disturbance? It will help to take on board any trends that can be discerned today for the future of the region and also to explore the best strategies in the light of different future scenarios. Some decisions will have to be revisited after one, two or more decades. However, to perceive heritage as an irreplaceable legacy of the past and at risk of falling victim to present-day events, does not help in recognising the potential of a changing heritage to contribute creatively to future-making. Indeed, the very heritage practices needed in any efforts of conservation, restoration, reconstruction, presentation and interpretation may be helpful in the recovery process to the extent that they directly involve relevant communities (see e.g. Jones et al 2017).

Conclusions about conservation

Given that heritage is about people, not about monuments, conservation must always be informed by the question of what we want the heritage to do in, and to, society in order to benefit specific people in present and future generations (Loulanski 2006). Full-scale reconstructions of previously existing structures may be helpful in various ways, as can be entirely new heritage or the absences left by heritage – as well as anything in-between these extremes. No strategy is ever innocent; none is inherently preferable over any other. Destruction and reconstruction are equally about the past-that-was and the future-to-be. Both involve loss and gain, concurrently manifesting continuities and discontinuities in the present. Both are about values and meanings for people, about the end of past certainties and the uncertainties of new beginnings.

Heated debates about the way to manage heritage and conservation have been held for more than a century. In many ways, these debates are a significant social practice in their own right, and through them heritage has created its own heritage by now (Holtorf 2012). This long tradition of engagement and discussion has left some important lessons for all of us.

Most importantly, when we manage specific heritage and determine strategies and practices of conservation, we are really managing ideas about the relations between past, present and future; we are negotiating ways of thinking about how human societies were, are, and can be. It is therefore never advisable to separate practice from theory – both are dependent on each other. The best decisions for the practice of heritage and conservation are the most thoughtful decisions, informed by the best thinking of a diverse range of people. The ICOMOS University Forum is an initiative that can make an important contribution to exactly that endeavour.

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