

**‘Authenticity’ for the Visited or for the Visitors?
‘Collective Memory’, ‘Collective Imagination’ and a View from the Future.**

Ciarán Benson

Emeritus Professor of Psychology
University College Dublin

Introduction

I come to this question as an outsider to ICOMOS, but as a happy invitee to the Paris seminar in March 2017. My background is in psychology and philosophy, but that has been accompanied by a long-term interest in cultural policy in Ireland. I wondered what it might be that I could offer colleagues from disciplines centrally involved in questions connected to World Heritage Sites and the evolution of the thinking that led UNESCO to champion their designation, preservation and defence. To that end I read as much as I could easily find on the evolution of that thinking and its application. I understood that my contribution was to provoke discussion ‘out of the box’, and what follows is written in that spirit.

ICOMOS 2016 included a paper by Dominique Franco on our oldest heritage of all, the human body, in which he considered ways of improving bodies’ functioning. There is also a relevant ancient evolutionary heritage that is psychological and cultural (Donald 2002, Dennett 2017). Consciousness, both individual and collective, has a very long evolutionary prehistory. Some argue that it dates from the origins of life itself three billion years ago (Feinberg & Mallatt 2016). For over five thousand years – the blink of an eye on evolution’s timescale! – it has also had an increasingly rich and complex *history*, most of it instantiated in, and perpetuated by, ruins, remains, ideas and kinds of writing.

Notable references to this permeate the ICOMOS papers presented in 2016, and also its prospectus for 2017: ‘mental landscapes of people’, ‘intangible perceptions and uses’, ‘tools of future-making’, ‘changes over time in perceptions and attitudes’, ‘creation of new identity for a

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community’, ‘retrieval of identity’, ‘connection to place’, ‘what people want and value’, ‘changes in significance and meaning’, ‘the mental map (associated with intangible values) of the inhabitants’, ‘universal value’, ‘typology of the diverse “kinds” of community’, and so on (ICOMOS 2016).

These are all ideas familiar to cultural and social psychology. There is an analogical relationship between the language of individual psychology – memory, perception, meaning, tools for thinking, identity, values, belongingness, acts, etc. – and the language of groups and communities such as ‘national identity’, ‘cultural memory’, ‘weltanschauung’, etc. (Benson 2001). But there are also limits of these analogies that it might be helpful to review. How, for instance, are ‘collective psychological attributes’ embodied in individual personal ones or vice-versa? Is the language of ‘collective memory’, for example, metaphorical and if it is what cautionary notes should accompany it? After all, we do ‘live by metaphors’ (Lakoff & Johnson 1980).

What relevance might psychological reflections on ‘memory’ have for the kinds of question facing ICOMOS, questions to do with donor power and influence, with the desirability or not of reconstructions, with the weight to be carried by the current criterion of ‘authenticity’, with whether authenticity as a valued feature is historically and culturally relative, with whether concerns with ‘the past’ will be altered by the massive urbanization of the world, with whether the oncoming transformations of ideas of reality posed by technologies creative of compelling virtual worlds will alter lived ‘reality’, and so on?

What follows are some reflections on these themes geared specifically to address the uses of terms like ‘authenticity’, ‘collective/cultural memory’ and ‘reality/virtuality’ in the kinds of debate that animate ICOMOS concerns.

‘World Heritage’ as an Ideal?

In its most literal sense, the project to designate World Heritage Sites and achievements is a work in progress. Its ostensible importance is its sense of preserving ‘memory’ in the form of perceptible historical traces of human significance, and sites of great natural beauty and significance. The project, thus understood, is essentially retrospective.

However, its more fundamental importance, it seems to me, is prospective and lies in the normative vision implicit in it, a vision that is less an act of ‘retrieval’ (though that is of course very valuable), and more an act of construction. But construction of what?

Whatever it is, each site that is designated is an element or character in an unfolding story, a tale that might or might not have a coherent or desirable ending. The 1994 Nara Document on Authenticity is a good guide to this implicit narrative:

“4. In a world that is increasingly subject to the forces of globalization and homogenization, and in a world in which the search for cultural identity is sometimes pursued through aggressive nationalism and the suppression of the cultures of minorities, *the essential contribution made by the consideration of authenticity in conservation practice is to clarify and illuminate the collective memory of humanity* (my emphasis)” (NARA 1994).

There is an assumption and an aspiration here to an idea of a ‘common humanity’ in that the reference is to the ‘collective memory of humanity’ rather than to the ‘collective *memories* of humanity’. Article 4 above explicitly recognises that nationalistic, and other such forces, can be the enemy of this ideal of unity and of the fundamental ideal and assertion of UNESCO that ‘*the cultural heritage of each is the cultural heritage of all.*’ The underlying desire is to create some kind of ideal umbrella identity for humanity that can accommodate difference, historically and culturally, while at the same time forging a superordinate common identity.

The concept of authenticity here carries a huge intellectual weight and yet, curiously, the concept remains undefined in the 1994 Nara document. There is a wisdom to this vagueness which is reminiscent of the framing of the 1948 UN Declaration of Human Rights. That Declaration deliberately avoided the question of where such rights came from in order to achieve a consensus that the Declaration would, in time, be justified by what it might subsequently enable (Benson 2004). Since the 1994 Nara document, the concept of authenticity has similarly evolved (Stovel 2008, Kono 2014). Sometimes, as in these instances, the very absence of an early delimitation of a concept’s meaning is what enables such meaning to grow and collectively establish itself. Evolving usage is evolving meaning.

This is the context for the following reflections from a psychological perspective. Uncertainty is the constant twin of the search for rigour. This can be seen from the earliest designations of World Heritage status. The decision to designate a site of the worst of human behaviour, Auschwitz-Birkenau, in just the second year of World Heritage inscriptions, (1979), was a clear indication that the worst as well as the best of human cultural achievements would be included. A year later, 1980, The Historic Centre of Rome was inscribed. I mention each of these as examples of the challenge to visitors to such sites, and the challenges for the guardians of them, to

distinguish ‘history’ (the systematic study of the past?) from ‘memory’ (traces subjectively retrievable by one or more subjects?).

As the controversy around Confederate Monuments in the US raged over the summer of 2017, James Grossman, the executive director of the American Historical Association, said that President Trump’s comments failed to recognise the difference between history and memory, which is always shifting. When you alter monuments, “you’re not changing history,” he said, “You’re changing how we remember history” (Schuessler 2017). This is an important clarification in that the object of ‘memory’ here is ‘history’, and history is a systematic study governed by rigorous rules of evidence. The use of the term ‘memory’, however, in discourses prevailing in this field is often suspiciously loose.

Even in a field as well-researched as the historic centre of Rome, huge problems confront the visitor. Mary Beard, Professor of Classics in the University of Cambridge, recently had this to say about the visitor experience, after lamenting the work of Mussolini’s ‘restorers’ in the 1930s:

“The ground surface is largely a confusing mass of rubble and masonry, interspersed with equally confusing holes left by archaeologists digging down in search of the structures, shrines and burials that formed the first layers of human occupation in the city of Rome, as far back as the eighth century BC. Even the trained eye finds it hard to work out how any of this fits together, or what the place would have looked like at any particular period of antiquity. Most visitors walk through the Forum baffled. Cicero would not have recognized it” (Beard 2017).

Authenticity, even in the most prominent World Heritage sites, is clearly just a beginning for an understanding of many of those sites. Coupling ‘authenticity’ with the idea of ‘collective memory of humanity’ is not unproblematic. The ‘of’ is the problem! Does it mean that ‘humanity’ is the ‘subject’ of the remembering, or does it mean that the ‘memory’ is of some version of the history of humanity? There is also, of course, the other side of this in that inevitably selective nature of ‘*collective forgetting*’ is actually the problem that World Heritage sites are trying to address. That is why some acquaintance with the findings and understanding of memory from a psychological perspective might be helpful as background to policy formulation in this area.

‘Personal Memory’ and ‘Collective Memory’: Limits of a Metaphor?

Students of memory have learnt many lessons over the last century. Perhaps the most significant for present purposes is that the vernacular understanding of memory as the *retrieval* of some trace that has been accurately and permanently stored in the brain has not been supported.

Also, to have a memory requires having a person or some entity to remember, and to whom or to which the memory is connected. However complex this might be when considering the personal memories of individual persons, when the idea is metaphorically extended to collectives (nations, cultures, groups) the question arises as to whether the term memory applies to the individuals comprising the group *who individually share similar personal memories* which in that sense are collective, or whether the group itself can be said to ‘have memories’ *even if the individuals comprising the group have no personal direct or immediate connection to what it is that is said to be collectively remembered*. If what is being referred to is in fact mediated – by education, media, propaganda, art, etc. – can it accurately be referred to as ‘memory’ and, if not, what would be a more pertinent term? We know that direct memory of the first kind peters out after about two generations (Boyer & Wertsch 2009).

Both of these questions were addressed by Sir Frederick Bartlett in his classic text on remembering in 1932 (Bartlett 1932/1977). He opposed, on the evidence of his experiments, the idea that memory was simply retrieval and argued instead that it was always constructive. His final conclusion was this:

“Memory, and all the life of imagery and words which goes with it, is one with the age old acquisition of the distance senses, and with that development of constructive imagination and constructive thought wherein at length we find the most complete release from the narrowness of presented time and space.” (Bartlett 1977, 314).

I will come back to this idea of ‘constructive imagination’ shortly. Bartlett also reflected on the then recent concept of ‘collective memory’.

The concept of ‘collective memory’ is most associated with Maurice Halbwachs who published his *Les Cadres Sociaux de la Mémoire* in 1925. Following Durkheim, Halbwachs argued that the social group constitutes a psychical entity very similar to that of individuals. This for him was not mere analogy or metaphor. He saw such ‘memories’ as models for education and development. While admiring of Halbwachs’ work, Bartlett argues that Halbwachs is speaking “only of memory *in* the group and not of memory *of* the group” (Bartlett 1977, 296). Such doubts about the notion of ‘group memory’ have persisted since then.

Research in the meantime has strongly confirmed Bartlett’s argument about the inherently constructive and reconstructive nature of memory. In the intervening eighty-five years since

Bartlett's *Remembering* what have we learnt about the issue of personal memory as construction as against retrieval?

Perhaps the two most famous case-studies in memory research are H.M. (Henry Gustav Molaison), who lost all capacity to lay down new long-term memories from the time of a controversial brain operation for epilepsy at twenty-seven years of age, and S (Solomon Shereshevsky), the mnemonist made famous by the Russian neuropsychologist Alexander Luria in his book *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1968), (Dittrich 2016, Johnson 2017). Each represents an example on opposite ends of the spectrum of failing to remember and exceptional capacity not to forget.

What general points of current relevance can be gleaned from these and other studies? We know that each time the brain activates 'a memory trace' that that memory changes. We know that remembering is, as Bartlett surmised, highly dynamic and that each and every time you remember something you never remember it in exactly the same way. We know that the neuronal connections underpinning memory constantly alter.

The Nobel Prizewinning research of John O'Keefe, and others, on the nature and functioning of 'place cells' in the Hippocampal area of the brain, have shown, at the detailed level of neurons, how mental maps coding for an organism's relationship to landmarks on that map occur. We know that remembering at an individual or personal level is inherently about re-establishing relationships that constantly change. H.M. lost that capacity. Perpetual reconstruction, not repetitive retrieval, is the hallmark of personal memory.

What can we learn from Luria's 'S' and his remarkable abilities to remember? First, S could be forgetful, as Johnson reports, unless he used his mnemonic devices to consciously remember. These devices involved imagining spaces – the main street of his native village, for example – throughout which he would connect and distribute what it was he wanted to remember. S was a showman who worked hard to perfect these devices for remembering. Creating *scenarios* for remembering is highly effective.

For our present purposes, what is particularly significant is the *role of imagination* in S's skills of remembering. Researchers like Daniel Schacter have shown how intertwined memory and imagination are, and that imagination draws heavily on memory (Johnson 2017). We also know how closely interconnected are the brain regions underpinning remembering and imagining. And we now know how easy it is to implant false memories and how unreliable are subjects' reports on

their certainty about such memories (Loftus 1997). Uncertainty, change, re-membering and re-imagining are central features of personal memory.

If ‘collective memory’ or ‘cultural memory’ are to be understood as literal extensions of personal memory (Maurice Halbwachs), or more plausibly as metaphorical extensions, (Boyer & Werstsch 2009, Part 3), what implications do the findings above about personal memory have for uses of the idea of ‘collective memory’ in discussions of heritage value?

Firstly, any such use of the idea of collective memory should be clear about how selective, partial, malleable, unstable, tentative, changing, and inconclusive are its contents. If individual memory is so open to these features, how much more so is collective memory? That is of course not to say that there are no grounds for the validity of memories. It is to say that remembering must always be hedged by caution and is open to negotiation. Even at a personal level, memories need to be authenticated and, sometimes, even though a person feels certain about the authenticity of a memory, more compelling evidence can show that feeling of certainty to be wrong. Oliver Sachs, amongst others, has given an example of this in his memoir (Benson 2013). Even when the falseness of his childhood memory was convincingly demonstrated to him, the certainty of that memory being true and his own, rather than supplied to him as it was by his brother’s letter, remained with him.

Secondly, given the forward thrust of the UNESCO ideal about common humanity, and the ambition for the realisation of its achievement, and given the fostering of such an ideal via World Heritage sites, maybe the emphasis should be less on memory and more on imagination? Surely the idea of collective memory should be complemented, at the very least, by the idea of a commonly shared ‘collective imagination’?

Thirdly, a focus on collective imagination is oriented towards *the future role of the past*, and geared towards an evolving narrative that is indebted to rigours of historical method. Imagination can help create that which is to be remembered, and single out that which is worth remembering.

Fourthly, the basis of the criterion of ‘authenticity’ would need more than the concept of collective memory to justify its use. That ‘more’ could include concepts of ‘collective’, ‘cultural’ and ‘constructive’ imagination, and the contribution they make to what a shared narrative of the trajectory of human achievement might mean. It of course remains true that trust in the authenticating process is a precondition for the authentication being accepted by others as true. The current controversies about truth, reporting and evidence in the Trump Era of the United States

underscore the problems here!

There are other centrally important questions involved here which are beyond the present discussion, most notably questions of individual selfhood and subjectivity, and all the varieties of group identity and perspective that are part of the processes of memory and imagination (Assman, 1995). There are also key issues to do with ideas of ‘associative memory’ and decision-making, all of which are beyond the current scope but which are key elements of a more complete account (Kahnemann 2012). This could involve presenting sites and presentations *authentically from the past*, but *as objects for imaginative reconstruction* that are prospectively integrated into collective, identity-forming narratives, including the UN ideal narrative of a unified, common humanity. The ‘big history’ approach of Yuval Harari comes to mind here (Harari 2015, 2016).

Conjectures on ‘Authenticity’, ‘What Past to Value’, ‘Virtuality’ and the Near Future.

What relevance, then, do these reflections on kinds of ‘memory’ have for the conceptual issues addressed by ICOMOS? Unsurprisingly for a psychologist, I was taken with Gauthier’s longstanding question, *Traiter la Ruine, ou le Visiteur?* (Gauthier 1991), or, as Stanley-Price puts it, “An ability to appreciate the authenticity of the past depends in the end on the observer, and not on the observed” (Stanley-Price 2009).

Authenticity is a question of degree. Primarily it involves evidence of lineage – Is this the original or part of the original or directly continuous as an iteration of the original? But that is only part of it. Trust, authority and credibility are also part of its meaning, as are ideas of truth and fact, and these are all open to be contested. Consideration of these issues is beyond our present scope. But they are relevant to what we can dimly see of the future, and are already features of the twenty-first century. Radical cultural shifts are now in train that are of epochal significance.

We can list a few of these oncoming changes in the natural and the cultural world that are connected to the idea of authenticity and world heritage. This is of course conjectural, but it is significant. World Heritage sites have been inscribed for just forty years now. Inevitably UNESCO’s concerns and ambitions are coloured by our particular historical-cultural time. But we are, from the perspective of our own species, in unprecedented evolutionary and historical times.

What might confront our descendants in ICOMOS-related enterprises just one hundred years from now? What do we know now that will surely influence thinking in 2117? Let’s take just a few

pieces of information currently available and imagine how issues of authenticity, reconstruction and virtuality might be framed in relation to preserving ‘the past’ in just one hundred years from now, assuming that we have not had a nuclear war or other such catastrophe!

The philosopher Daniel Dennett (2017) instances the ‘MacCready Number’ (contentious and speculative, but arresting) to illustrate the rate of change that comes with human domination of the planet. MacCready estimated that 10,000 years ago, at the dawn of agriculture, human beings with their domesticated pets and animals, comprised 0.1% of the terrestrial (not marine) vertebrate biomass. Today the estimate is that humans and their animals (mostly cattle) make up 98% of that terrestrial vertebrate biomass.

Consider that at the dawn of Rome, whose ruins we referred to earlier as a World Heritage site, there were somewhere around 100 million people on the planet. Now there are *75 times* that number and growing at an unprecedented rate.

Consider that today, 54% of the world’s population lives in urban areas. For the first time in history most human beings live in cities. This proportion is expected to increase to 66 per cent by 2050, adding another 2.5 billion people to urban populations by 2050. Most of this growth (90%?) will be concentrated in Asia and Africa, according to the United Nations in 2014. One further UN projection is that in 2100 there may be 11.2 billion people on the planet.

Consider that in just 13 years time there will be 41 megacities each with more than 10 million people. By 2050 two-thirds of humans will live in cities. City density will be a major issue. China is currently planning Xiongan, a megacity which will be three times the size of New York (Economist Intelligence Unit 2012).

Couple all this with the digital communications revolution and the realities that digitally networked individuals and communities – living in close proximity in dense urban environments which are globally interconnected – are co-creating, and now ask the question: How in centuries to come will these new world heritage sites be capable of preservation and inscription?

One answer is that it will only be possible to do as virtual reality since the scale of what will count as world heritage at that stage will render current models of authentic preservation inoperable. Strings of code may be of world heritage significance by then, and the virtual may be the dominant real! Will ICOMOS a century from now include virtual space as a possible home for new kinds of sites of significance?

In such a world, issues of authenticity and memory will, as I have speculated elsewhere, present historically and culturally unprecedented challenges for individual personal memory and selfhood, and even more so for ideas of collective memory, truth and group identity (Benson 2013). I have suggested that the key kinds of memory that are central to the fabrication of personal identity may, in the coming time, be enabled, falsely, by immersive technologies leading to radically new forms of subjective uncertainty. How can I know that what I remember ‘actually’ happened? Those doubts would only multiply when extended to the metaphorical idea of collective memory.

Imagining the future like this suggests that the focus should indeed broaden to consider the visitor as well as the visited, and to raise the question of what an ‘authentic visitor experience’ might be. These are current concerns not just of those focused on a past of human achievements, but also those preoccupied with rescuing parts of the natural world from the destructive effects humans have had on them. Ecological restorationists are also wrestling with concepts like ‘restoration’, ‘rehabilitation’, ‘mitigation’ etc. (Woodworth 2013).

Does it matter, or will it, if individuals and groups cannot distinguish the ersatz from the real, the fake from the original, the faithfully reconstructed from the imaginatively reused, or the virtual from the actual?

If it *does not* matter, then what is it that does or will? And if it *does* matter, then what is at stake in such blurring of boundaries?

Big questions for a coming time!

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