

# ICOA1675: OUTNUMBERED 16:1. EVALUATING THE GLOBAL ONLINE COMMUNITIES OF THE SYDNEY OPERA HOUSE

## Subtheme 03: Protecting and Interpreting Cultural Heritage in the Age of Digital Empowerment

**Session 1:** Relevance of Digital Tools & Technology in Documentation, Conservation and Safeguarding of Heritage & Community Engagement

**Location:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Time:** December 13, 2017, 10:10 – 10:25

### Author: Cristina Garduño Freeman

*Dr Cristina Garduño Freeman is an academic in heritage, architecture and digital media, focused on social value and participatory culture. She is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow in the Australian Centre for Architectural History, Urban and Cultural Heritage at the University of Melbourne. She has a book on the Sydney Opera House forthcoming in 2017 and won the IVSA Rieger Award in 2014. Previously she lectured at Deakin University and practiced in architecture and visual communication.*

**Abstract:** The exponential growth of social media platforms over the last decade has brought digital culture and public participation to the fore in the field of heritage. Initially, social media promised to be a panacea for democracy; enabling global communities to use digital technologies to engage with World Heritage properties. However, the reality has turned out to be much more complex and nuanced: challenging established national narratives; potentially infringing on copyright; blurring notions of communities and audiences; and revealing the entanglement of tangible and intangible forms of cultural heritage.

World Heritage is increasingly mediated by the digital sphere. In 2013 the Sydney Opera House had a global online community of 128 million. These digital engagements outnumber in-person visits 16:1 and have been estimated to have an economic value of \$59 million AuD (Deloitte, 2013). Using the Sydney Opera House as a case study, the paper describes public forms of participation with this place via platforms such as YouTube, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Facebook and Flickr. Then it reflects on their implications for the World Heritage program's strategic objectives of 'increasing public awareness through communication' and 'enhancing the role of communities' in its implementation. There is a growing imperative to evaluate the digital engagements of global online communities, especially when many of these 'visitors' will likely never physically set foot in the Sydney Opera House itself.

**Key words:** *participatory culture, social media, Sydney Opera House, world heritage*

In the decade since the Sydney Opera House was inscribed onto the World Heritage List in 2007 annual visitors have doubled from 4 million to 8.2 million, audiences have grown from 1.2 to 1.5 million and tours to experience this iconic building have increased by a third. (Sydney Opera House 2007: 1; 2016). In addition, the Sydney Opera House now also reports a digital reach of 168 million. Digital communities have become a valuable asset. Deloitte has estimated the digital value of the Sydney Opera House to be worth \$59 million AuD (Simes et al. 2013: 20). This is the result of the managements' focus on developing online content, social media engagement creative and participatory online events. The Sydney Opera House, like many World Heritage sites, also has iconic value. Deloitte estimated this 'non-use value' to be worth \$2.1 billion AuD. This non-use value captures the immaterial significance of Sydney Opera House that is beyond its physical site boundaries.

Drawing on research that explores the social value and participatory culture of the Sydney Opera House (Garduño Freeman 2018), this paper reflects on how iconic value opens up new opportunities for the implementation the World Heritage program's strategic objectives of communication and communities. The research analysed a collection of over 1000 online representations as well as observations of discussions and activities posted on social media sites such as YouTube, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Facebook and Flickr. While such fleeting 'digital engagements' might not appear to matter, en-masse they reveal the way in which global communities appropriate, extend and transform the cultural significance of the Sydney Opera House. These digital engagements now outnumber in-person visits 16:1 and have become a far more common way to experience this, and many other World Heritage sites. If the potential of global online communities to contribute to long term conservation is to be harnessed, then the contemporary interpretation of communication and communities needs to be reframed. The paper presents the findings from the research into the building's iconic value and discusses some of the challenges of recognising and valuing people's engagement online outside of formal online events organised by Sydney Opera House management.

The emergence of Web 2.0 redefined mass communication. The paradigm shift from read-only to a read-write has meant that the concept of 'participatory culture' has become widely accepted. Previously, audiences were usually conceived of as passive spectators. New media and participatory culture thinks of audiences as 'fans' ones which are «active, critically engaged and creative» groups of people (Jenkins 1988). Participatory culture enables new readings of the popular representations of the Sydney Opera House. Iconic value – part visual and part social – is embedded in a series of practices that articulate people's connection to this place; yet the idea of 'global online communities' within the discourse of World Heritage, has to date, received little attention. While the convention is widely recognised for «promoting the idea that heritage [is] a universal concern» (Harrison 2015: 301), when communities are discussed they are mostly characterised as 'local'. In contrast, the activities of 'audiences', 'tourists' and 'visitors' are seen as consumption, one which often threatens the conservation of inscribed sites. The research reveals that global online communities engage with the Sydney Opera House through six socio-visual practices (Fig.1): they tell the story of the building's realisation; they critique the building's form as both ridiculous and sublime; they make the Sydney Opera House both miniature and gigantic; they trade on the prestige of the Sydney Opera House; they visit the building and appropriate it through souvenirs and capture its fantastic architectural forms through photographs. All of these practices are shared online and arise from the social value held for this place by individuals and groups both near and far.

In celebration of its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2002 of World Heritage Convention the Budapest Declaration was ratified. The document articulates four strategic objectives to guide the program’s future implementation: to encourage and ensure; the geographic and representative ‘credibility’ of the World Heritage List; the effective ‘conservation’ of World Heritage properties; the development of effective ‘capacity-building’ measures; and increase public awareness, involvement and support for World Heritage through ‘communication’ (UNESCO 2002: 6-7). In 2007 a fifth ‘c’ was added to articulate the interconnectedness of ‘communities’ with the existing strategic objects and to reinforce the importance of communities in the implementation of the World Heritage Convention (UNESCO 2007: 7). These strategic objectives were reinforced in the Strategic Action Plan and Vision. The plan recognised the opportunities that new technology brings and how it «enables faster and more efficient awareness raising and knowledge sharing» (UNESCO 2011: 4), and at the same time aspires to «harness civil society support» for the World Heritage program (UNESCO 2011: 4). Yet, communication and communities are positioned as strategically distinct areas. Some examples from the research illustrate the way in which participatory culture intertwines communication and community. These informal online engagements extend the experience of the Sydney Opera House for people in ways «in ways that are meaningful, that enhance well-being and ensure an effective (affective) participation in social practice» (Schofield 2015: 419). Recognising these activities, as valid and significant interactions with heritage would harness new technologies and mass communication to draw together global support for World Heritage. Some key instances are reported and discussed to illustrate the potential and challenges.



Fig.1– Participatory Culture of the Sydney Opera House.

On Wikipedia, the 'Sydney Opera House' article page is 'watched' by a group of people who are communally invested in telling the story of this place. By analysing the 'Talk' and 'View History' pages of the main article page, it is possible to discern the complex negotiations that occur around the published version of the building's history and realisation. These 'back pages' document the interactions of this online community centred on the Wikipedia article page. Their careful editorship seeks to represent the Sydney Opera House accurately, with technical, historical and aesthetic details at the forefront of debates. The community of 'watchers' sense of ownership over the public Wikipedia article demonstrates how such online collaboration engenders a sense of attachment and investment in this place. In contrast, recreations of Eric Thake's well-known 1979 linocut of the Sydney Opera House titled *An Opera House* in every home demonstrate how critiquing a way of making personal connections is. Thake's linocut compares freshly washed dishes in a drying rack to the Sydney Opera House; it serves as inspiration for other 'dishwashing' imagery posted online. Thake's witty visual pun, like the recreations that 'see' this image in unrelated piles of washing up, draws this national monument into the realm of feminine domesticity. Such critiques are not solely centred on dishes in a dish rack but extend to other analogies such as flowers unfolding, mushrooms and even a pet dog's hairstyle. Such examples of participatory culture pose challenges for World Heritage; they potentially impinge on international systems of copyright, the authority of the expert and the endorsement of national narratives. Validating such instances of participatory culture could be seen to subvert the very values for which a particular place has been inscribed.

Other instances of participatory culture demonstrate the complexity of such practices. At times, they blur the boundaries between tangible and intangible forms of culture, and often they combine situated experiences with digitally mediated ones. Participation can be community led or motivated by commercial organisations. Participatory practices often transgress corporate regulation. The making of a giant 1.8 tonne chocolate mud cake in the shape of the Sydney Opera House in 2011 to celebrate Australia Day was both a media stunt by cake company Planet Cake as well as a charity fund raiser (\$40,000 was raised). The Sydney Opera House has not only trademarked the silhouette, but in 2014 added the three-dimensional form of the building in order to protect it. Its use and association underpins the organisation's funding through their corporate partnership scheme. Yet, the volunteer participants who helped to make the gigantic cake described their experience of making the Sydney Opera House through an architectural lens, finding new appreciation of the complexity of the structure amongst the challenge of working with edible media. While the main event was located in Sydney, the process was documented on YouTube and shared with Planet Cake's online community via Facebook, television and traditional media. The decorating of cakes has a long cultural history and could be considered a form of intangible culture. Yet in this instance, the skilled practice of cake making enables intimate and highly relevant engagement experiences with World Heritage icon, one which entangles online communication with situated ones to draw together groups of people around a specific endeavour.

In examining the recent implementation of the fourth and fifth 'cs', communication and communities, it is evident that communication is primarily seen as awareness raising and about disseminating information, while community is primarily focused on engaging with local communities around specific World Heritage properties (UNESCO 2017: 33-7). The opportunity to engage with global communities through participatory culture is yet to be realised, at a time when the exponential growth of online engagements suggests that this may already be the primary way people engage with World Heritage. As the fragility of many sites becomes evident recognising the role of experiences beyond the sites themselves is becoming a growing imperative. Accepting alternative experiences as equally authentic engagements to in-person visits will be necessary. It must be considered, that as Cornelius Holtorf provocatively argues, in «50

years, it is likely that much of what we today preserve as cultural heritage will have been redefined and rewritten as something else. And other things we cannot even imagine today will have arrived, rendering part of our present world into heritage» (Holtorf and Högberg 2015: 515). The consequence of this is that new understandings of ‘community’ are needed. Instead of only defining communities geographically, perhaps, Arjun Appadurai’s concept of ‘communities of sentiment’ might be useful. Here communities emerge in response to mass media enabling collective engagement with culture, where groups of people can imagine and feel things together (Appadurai 1996: 8).

The potential of participatory culture also applies to projects instigated by World Heritage managing organisations. In 2009 the Sydney Opera House first adopted innovative online strategies to reach new audiences. After successfully broadcasting the lighting of the sails as part of the Luminous Music Festival (Vivid Sydney) and attracting 14,000 online viewers (Sydney Opera House 2010: 3), the management followed with an online dance competition called *My Mutation*. Dancers were invited to perform a set choreography with their own improvised ending, and to participate by uploading their performance on YouTube (“YouTube Dancer Hits Centre Stage” 2009). The competition garnered 252,000 hits worldwide (Sydney Opera House 2010: 3). Analysis of similar participatory projects, such as Eric Whitacre’s Virtual Choir <<https://ericwhitacre.com/the-virtual-choir>> demonstrates that participants interact with each other around such events across multiple platforms, sharing information and experiences in both fleeting and profound ways (Carvalho and Goodyear 2014: 77). Like the instances of participatory culture described above these projects combine communication and community in order to enable personal experiences beyond the boundary of organisations and physical sites.

The challenge in thinking about the strategic objectives of communication and community in an age mediated by internet communication technologies is that they become blurred. The presence of proprietary websites, of online archives, the circulation of images coupled with people’s participation across and through social media platforms offers new ways to experience World Heritage therefore reshapes ideas of its communities when considered at a global scale. Attachment and emotional investment in places is not founded on in person visits. Online, belonging to a community becomes «judged in the minds of participants rather than [in] the geographical spaces they occupy, and is defined by the subjective experiences and associations it engenders» (Waterton 2010: 6). Even though participation is not uniform, for every individual that creates content, there are nine others who edit and ninety who observe.<sup>1</sup> Understood through the lens of participatory culture, the impressive digital reach figures reported by the Sydney Opera House, as well as Deloitte’s estimate of its non-use value is indicative of a much larger global community invested in the conservation of this place.

## Bibliography

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Carvalho, L., and Goodyear, P. (2014). *The Architecture of Productive Learning Networks*. NY: Routledge.
- Garduño Freeman, C. (2018). *Participatory Culture and the Social Value of an Architectural Icon: Sydney Opera House*. UK: Routledge.

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1% internet rule (1:9:90) posits that for each person actively contributing content online, there are nine people editing or engaging with content and ninety who view it.

- Harrison, R. (2015). *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research: Heritage and Globalization*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 297-312.
- Holtorf, C., and Högberg, A. (2015). *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research: Contemporary Heritage and the Future*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 509-23.
- Jenkins, H. (1988). “*Star Trek* Reread, Rerun, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching.” *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* 5 (2):85-107. Accessed 21/01/2010. doi: 10.1080/15295038809366691.
- Schofield, J. (2015). *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research: ‘Thinkers and Feelers’: A Psychological Perspective on Heritage and Society*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan. p. 416-25.
- Simes, R., O'Mahony, J., Farrall, F., Huggins, K., and Redhill, D. (2013). “How Do You Value an Icon? The Sydney Opera House: Economic, Cultural and Digital Value.” *Deloitte*. Accessed 15/09/2017. <https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/Deloitte/au/Documents/Economics/deloitte-au-economics-how-do-you-value-icon-2013.pdf>.
- Sydney Opera House. (2007). “Sydney Opera House Annual Report 2006/07: Living Place for the World.” Accessed 07/06/2012. <https://www.sydneysoperahouse.com/content/dam/pdfs/annual-reports/Annual-Report-2006-2007.pdf>.
- (2010). “Sydney Opera House Annual Report 2009/10: Your House.” Accessed 07/06/2012. <https://www.sydneysoperahouse.com/content/dam/pdfs/annual-reports/SOH-annual-report-2009-2010.pdf>.
- (2016). “Sydney Opera House Annual Report 2015/16.” Accessed 07/06/2012. [https://www.sydneysoperahouse.com/content/dam/pdfs/annual-reports/Sydney\\_Opera\\_House\\_Annual\\_Report\\_2015-16.pdf](https://www.sydneysoperahouse.com/content/dam/pdfs/annual-reports/Sydney_Opera_House_Annual_Report_2015-16.pdf).
- UNESCO. (2002). “Decisions Adopted by the 26th Session of the World Heritage Committee (WHC-02/Conf.202/25).” *World Heritage Centre*. Accessed 21/03/2017. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2002/whc-02-conf202-25e.pdf>.
- (2007). “Item 13 of the Provisional Agenda: Evaluation of the Results of the Implementation of the Committee’s Strategic Objectives. Proposal for a ‘Fifth C’ to Be Added to the Strategic Objectives (WHC-07/31.Com/13b).” *World Heritage Centre*. Accessed 23/09/2017. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2007/whc07-31com-13be.pdf>.
- (2011). “Item 11 of the Provisional Agenda: Future of the World Heritage Convention.” Accessed 02/11/2017. <http://whc.unesco.org/document/115441>.
- (2017). “Item 5 of the Provisional Agenda: Reports of the World Heritage Centre and the Advisory Bodies.” *World Heritage Centre*. Accessed 22/10/2017. <http://whc.unesco.org/archive/2017/whc17-41com-5A-en.pdf>.
- Waterton, E. (2010). “The Advent of Digital Technologies and the Idea of Community.” *Museum Management and Curatorship* 25 (1):5-11. Accessed 03/05/2012. doi: 10.1080/09647770903529038.
- “YouTube Dancer Hits Centre Stage.” (26 September, 2009). *Sydney Morning Herald*. Accessed 20/10/2017. <http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/youtube-dancer-hits-centre-stage/2009/09/26/1253813653488.html>.

## List of Figures

*Fig.1 – Participatory Culture of the Sydney Opera House*

# ICOA1675: EN INFERIORITE NUMERIQUE 16: 1. UNE EVALUATION DES COMMUNAUTES MONDIALES EN LIGNE DE L'OPERA DE SYDNEY

## Sous-thème 03: Protéger et interpréter le patrimoine culturel à l'ère de l'autonomisation numérique

**Session 1:** Pertinence des outils numériques et de la technologie dans la documentation, la conservation et la sauvegarde du patrimoine et l'engagement communautaire

**Lieu:** Silver Oak 2, India Habitat Centre

**Date et heure:** 13 Décembre, 2017, 10:10 – 10:25

### **Auteur: Cristina Garduño Freeman**

*Dr Cristina Garduño Freeman est une universitaire en patrimoine, architecture et médias numériques, qui se concentre sur la valeur sociale et la culture participative. Elle est chercheure postdoctorale au Centre australien d'histoire de l'architecture, patrimoine urbain et culturel de l'Université de Melbourne. Elle publiera un ouvrage sur l'Opéra de Sydney en 2017 et a remporté le prix IVSA Rieger en 2014. Auparavant, elle a enseigné à l'Université Deakin et a pratiqué l'architecture et la communication visuelle.*

**Résumé:** La croissance exponentielle des plateformes de médias sociaux au cours de la dernière décennie a placé la culture numérique et la participation publique au premier plan du domaine du patrimoine. Initialement, les médias sociaux ont promis d'être une panacée pour la démocratie; permettant à la communauté mondiale d'utiliser les technologies numériques pour interagir avec les biens du patrimoine mondial. Cependant, la réalité s'est révélée beaucoup plus complexe et nuancée: remettant en question les récits nationaux établis; enfreignant potentiellement les droits d'auteur; brouillant les notions de communautés et d'auditoires; et révélant l'enchevêtrement des formes tangibles et intangibles du patrimoine culturel.

Le patrimoine mondial est de plus en plus médiatisé dans la sphère numérique. En 2013, l'Opéra de Sydney avait une communauté en ligne globale de 128 millions d'abonnés. Ces interactions virtuelles sont plus nombreuses que les visites en personne par un facteur de 16: 1 et ont une valeur économique estimée à 59 millions de dollars australiens (Deloitte, 2013). Utilisant l'Opéra de Sydney comme cas de figure, la présentation décrit les formes publiques d'interaction avec ce lieu via des plateformes telles que YouTube, Pinterest, Wikipedia, Facebook et Flickr. Il considère ensuite leur impact sur les objectifs stratégiques du programme du patrimoine mondial, à savoir «sensibiliser davantage le public par la communication» et «renforcer le rôle des communautés» par sa mise en œuvre. Il est de plus en plus impératif d'évaluer les interactions virtuelles des communautés en ligne mondiales. Surtout quand contient compte du fait qu'un grand nombre de ces «visiteurs» ne mettront jamais les pieds sur le site de l'Opéra de Sydney.

**Mots-clés:** culture participative, médias sociaux, Opéra de Sydney, Patrimoine mondial