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Roundtable VI: Exploring Heritage as Culture: Disciplines, Theories, Method

Ilaria Rosetti, Silvia Naldini, Erik de Maaker

Date: 28 November 2019, 11.00

**Moderators: Erik de Maaker (Leiden University, The Netherlands),
Silvia Naldini (TU Delft, The Netherlands)**

Catalysts:

Prof. Pieter ter Keurs (Leiden University, The Netherlands)

Prof. Carola Hein (TU Delft, The Netherlands)

André van Deursen (TU Delft, The Netherlands)

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INTRODUCTION

Cultural heritage can be a key element in achieving sustainable development, UNESCO (2016) has argued. Heritage, and processes of heritage creation, are then assumed to be conducive to the development of sustainable and inclusive livelihoods and societies. But what constitutes tangible or intangible heritage for some people, may not be experienced as such by others. Understanding of "heritage" also changes over time: what at one time was deemed valuable may lose that appeal and significance a few decades later. Likewise, as cultural appreciation changes, new forms of heritage emerge. Academics, operating from different disciplinary perspectives, play an important role in exploring, identifying, and acknowledging what is deemed "heritage".

The aim of this roundtable was to explore how disciplinary perspectives can contribute to heritage creation and to sustainability. To what extent is there a need for an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary approach to defining heritage? What kind of cooperative engagements might this require? And what new synergies might this produce? Roundtable moderators and catalysts were scholars in architecture and urban design as well as in the humanities and social sciences.

The roundtable was organized around three main questions, which were answered by all the participants:

- 1 How does your disciplinary perspective shape your approach to sustainable heritage, and align with or deviate from "institutionalized" understandings of sustainable heritage?
- 2 In your own research practice, what propels projects of 'heritage creation'? Why do people want to create heritage, or expect certain objects or practices to be acknowledged as heritage?
- 3 What is the relevance of transdisciplinary approaches for you? In what respects are these lacking, and what might they contribute?

The roundtable was attended by about 30 conference participants and triggered a lively discussion.

QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION

Q: How do disciplinary perspectives shape our approach to sustainable heritage?

Thanks to the fact that the speakers belonged to different disciplines, such as anthropology, materials studies, and architecture, the question was answered from different perspectives, which was very interesting and stimulating. It showed that what we perceive as sustainable and what we value as heritage can vary according to one's point of view. More confronting was the realization that those values are related to places and cultural contexts, people's habits and time, and that they are the object of continuous negotiation.

- Pieter - Anthropological point of view (museum) → return of artifacts in order to foster their impact at a local level, their relevance for the (descendants of) people from whom they were 'collected'.
- Silvia - Materials point of view → sustainability should not only be related to saving energy (e.g. insulation). Think of circularity and vernacular architecture.
- Andre - architectural point of view from a heritage perspective, multidisciplinary approach → heritage as well as different stakeholders need to be integrated from the beginning to foster sustainability of practices and of heritage values (preaching comes from research and experience comes from practice). We should use heritage values to bring people together.
- Carola - values are dynamic, how do we construct preferences? Maybe what we don't value much today will be the heritage of tomorrow. We need a critical approach to how heritage is constructed, and the same applies to sustainability, the definition of which is mostly based on environmental conditions, although evolving social customs are also fundamental. Now we talk about "green by design" which is different from saying that green is our only choice.
- Erik - anthropological point of view → different people have different perspectives on the same thing, e.g. in a village where there is a proposal to make part of the land a protected area, locals can have different reactions to the idea, as they relate/interact differently with the land.

Discussion:

Social sustainability is sometimes neglected in places of memory. The process of giving meanings to places can be complex, discordant, and conflicting. In some cases, places need to be appropriated by local people in order to avoid becoming empty icons.

- There are no problems in life, only challenges.
- What we design/strategize today will be the heritage of tomorrow.
- Heritage is a process, it changes, evolves, in a continuous negotiation of values.

Q: What propels "heritage creation"?

Being aware of diversity allows us to see the complexity of customs and traditions, change our idea of what heritage is and how to present it, transmit it and "offer" it as such. Choices should be based on cultural mapping (mapping resources). In this process, it is crucial to develop cultural strategies, values assessment and significance assessment frameworks in an inclusive way, in order to take account of all the different stakeholders' perspectives.

- Silvia – does heritage creation lead to a permanent status and does it guarantee protection? Example of an abandoned monument, which loses its status and is demolished.
- Carola - who are the people in charge of defining heritage?
- Andre - Hi studio doesn't create heritage, but only makes buildings. Hi studio documents landscape elements to preserve the knowledge and only then do they proceed with new constructions.

Discussion:

- Amar - Minimalization of stakeholders is a co-optation process.
- Making choices should be based on cultural mapping (mapping resources) on cultural strategy
- values assessment, significance assessment (significance frameworks).
- A participant from the Reinwardt Academie in Amsterdam talked about a case in Malawi where the government pushed for a traditional healing dance for spirit possession to be included in the Intangible Heritage list, but the people who perform this dance didn't want this recognition
- Concept of LOCAL and GLOBAL [see A Sustainist Lexicon Michiel Schwarz] case from Indonesia, where listing is guided by willingness to join the global discourse on heritage (via listing post-colonial heritage), but maybe local values are invested elsewhere. The government wants to listen to locals, but is also dealing with these global trends.

Q: What is the importance of transdisciplinary approaches?

We speak different languages and yet we should work as a community to achieve a more global assessment of values. Therefore, we should start looking for common ground among disciplines, to enable common understanding and cooperation, because interdisciplinary work is needed. People-centered approaches have been mentioned many times this week. In aiming to foster complementary collaborations, the strengths and limitations of different approaches should be better understood, as well as the potential, and the role of stakeholders, (e.g. NGOs' potential to foster education).

- Andre - we speak different "languages" and should look for common ground to address different points of view.
- The importance of education (multigenerational, inclusive) --> in Montana the Native American culture (genocide, etc.) is mandatory in school.
- We train according to disciplines at university, should we change that? --> what if we could train based on systems? I would say there should be more multidisciplinary in our education programs at university
- NGOs play different roles in fostering interdisciplinarity (the University of Cyprus works with NGOs; every year they select a number of students and train them in an interdisciplinary way via NGOs in collaboration with the Ministry of Culture).
- Need to work more intensively with other disciplines (e.g. change management)
- People are ever-present, they are central: people-centered approaches were addressed many times during the conference.
- In existing legislation it is difficult to perceive the different emotional values that people attribute to heritage.
- How do we acknowledge the inherent biases of different disciplines so that in future people will understand who took decisions in heritage creation?

CONCLUSIONS

Heritage creation and sustainability are strongly connected. The acknowledged material and immaterial heritage should be protected, and its future use is a means of making it sustainable. The meaning of heritage and the values attributed to it are related to places and cultural contexts, people's customs and time, and they are the object of continuous negotiation. It is important to share the tasks and responsibilities of creating heritage with different stakeholders, to include a variety of perspectives and the concept of diversity in the final assessment.