

# Towards a Better Approach: A Critical Analysis of Heritage Preservation Practices

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## Abstract

This essay aims at providing insights into understanding contemporary society's efforts in preserving heritage for future generations. Through a critical analysis of literature, it investigates the development of heritage preservation methods from the top-down listing approach proposed by UNESCO since the 1970s to the more recent bottom-up approach that centers on community participation. It argues that both the concept of heritage and the duty of heritage preservation are an evolving process that does not have a definite response. How to best preserve our heritage thus requires maintaining an open mind that perceives preservation as change and invites active engagement of heritage in the present.

## Keywords

Heritage Preservation, Sustainable Development, Critical Analysis, Change

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## 1. Introduction

Heritage is the root of humankind, one that offers us a concrete link to our past and shapes human society. It can be tangible, such as the pyramids and the *Mona Lisa*, a living expression like the Chinese New Year and the tango, or natural phenomena like the coral reefs and animals of diverse species. It is something handed down from one generation to the next in a perpetual act of preservation that ensures the continuation of that heritage in the present as well as in the future. Even as that heritage may shift and change with each subsequent generation, the result is an intrinsic sense of continuity between past, present, and future. This preservation requires action: architectural monuments require structural assessment; folk songs must hold their tune; natural landscapes need protection from pollution. Heritage, however, is not only under threat from benign

neglect and forgetting; there are also those who seek to weaponize heritage in the name of personal gain or radical ideology, from the looting of tombs to the deliberate annihilation of sites and cities by terrorist groups (Bauer, 2015; Murowchick, 2013). Generations before us have facilitated the survival of these treasures; we, today, are the caretakers of heritage, and we have a responsibility to ensure the continued survival of its tangible and intangible markers for future generations.

Few today would argue against the notion that heritage is both important and deserving of preservation and that taking an active part in its destruction is to commit a crime against the culture to which that heritage belongs as well as humanity at large. To be against the active destruction of heritage is not a radical idea. What is far more telling is a person's stance on the active preservation of heritage for future generations. While one might see the destruction of heritage as a crime, he or she may not necessarily agree that the preservation of heritage is a duty. The fact remains, however, that one cannot take a wait-and-see approach to the survival of heritage: it is a process that requires active and continuous effort. To put it simply, declining to take an active role in the preservation of cultural heritage in the present is tantamount to participating in its destruction.

It is not enough though to accept that we bear responsibility for the preservation of heritage: it is also our duty to develop effective methods. This essay addresses the research question of how present society should preserve heritage for the future. Sections 2 to 4 critically explore the main-stream top-down processes led by international and national organizations and the bottom-up approaches undertaken by smaller initiatives and local communities. In doing so, the essay considers the benefits and challenges that these methods pose to the active preservation of *all* heritage, regardless of perceived status or material viability. Based on these discussions, Sections 5 and 6 then propose possible approaches to ensure the active preservation of such heritage for the benefit of the present as well as future generations. The essay argues that the best approach is to perceive preservation as change instead of a single, definite response.

## **2. The Top-Down Approach: Concentration of Resources**

Most existing theories and practices regarding the protection of heritage derive from the standard-setting initiatives of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), which has pioneered international heritage preservation efforts since its foundation in 1945 (Isar, 2011). The contemporarily dominant approach of preserving heritage is a process of categorizing, which gives specific and legal meanings for some heritage (Carman, 2003). For example, UNESCO's foundational 1972 Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention) and the similarly critical 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH Convention) established two representative lists aimed

at preserving emblems of cultural heritage that are exemplars (UNESCO, 2003). In other words, the lists include emblems of heritage that are perceived as both exceptional but also as having the ability to stand as a representative for similar sites, objects, or traditions (Titchen, 1996). UNESCO labels such emblems as exemplifying “outstanding universal values” that can be recognized both in the present and future (UNESCO, 1972).

UNESCO’s approach to the categorization and prioritization of cultural heritage has been widely adopted by different nation states, which—in addition to rushing to get emblems of their heritage inscribed on UNESCO’s list—create internal, country-specific heritage lists of their own based on UNESCO’s model. Heritage selected for these lists receives greater governmental support, such as subsidies and media exposure (Maags, 2018). The World Heritage and ICH conventions also produce lists of heritage in urgent need of safeguarding, thus raising attention for heritage sites and practices whose current neglect may soon lead to their destruction to prioritize the allocation of resources devoted to their preservation.

This top-down approach of using lists to define and preserve heritage has largely proven fruitful. Take for example the Chinese engraved block printing technique, an ancient printing technique invented in the sixth century that facilitated the dissemination of knowledge and documentation of historical records in ancient China. Considered to be one of the foremost inventions of ancient China, block printing is still practiced by small communities in China, especially in the city of Yangzhou where the technique once thrived (Cheng, 2020). Modern printing technology nevertheless threatened the continued practice of the technique, necessitating governmental interventions to preserve the tradition. The inscription of Chinese block printing on UNESCO’s list of intangible cultural heritage in 2009 proved especially critical to rejuvenating this dying technique, as its inclusion encouraged the allocation of national and local resources that have ensured the technique and its history are not only celebrated but still practiced in China (Zhang, 2021).

Despite its many benefits, the systematization of cultural heritage and its preservation through such lists is not without its downfalls. Scholar Laurajane Smith labels such methods as “Authorized Heritage Discourse” (AHD), which refers to the process of assigning perceptual value to heritage that directly impacts preservation processes, often prioritizing certain practices to satisfy the needs of an authority, like state officials or heritage professionals (Smith, 2006). Scholars argue that the nature of the listing preservation approach is highly problematic, especially as the power of determining an emblem of heritage’s inclusion on such lists depends completely on the authorities with the power to lobby for and ultimately vote on its inclusion (Escallón, 2020). AHD thus “legitimizes what heritage is, and defines who has the ability to speak for and about the nature and meaning of heritage” (Smith, 2006). With international and national lists growing annually, AHD shapes public understanding of what *specific* kinds and characteristics of heritage are worth preserving: ones that are aes-

thetically pleasing, monumental, and tangible. Such an approach privileges heritage with values that can be more easily agreed upon by a broader audience, which helps serve as a tool for nation-states in generating a homogenized national narrative (Chronis, 2005). In short, AHD works to preserve only some kinds of heritage while neglecting others.

### 3. The Bottom-Up Approach: Empowerment of Communities

While top-down approaches led by authorities better suit a larger picture of heritage preservation, it left out individual voices and many times can neglect the actual impact on the ground. Scholars like Smith (2006) and Poullos (2010) have instead argued for a bottom-up approach to heritage preservation that emphasizes “heritage as a process.” In contrast with AHD, such an approach favors what heritage *does* versus what heritage *is*. “Heritage as process” argues that no heritage is solely tangible nor do physical objects and sites have intrinsic value (Smith, 2006). As demonstrated by research by Deacon (2004), tangible sites are invested with meaning only through the interpretation of the intangible activities associated with those places. Values are instead culturally ascribed, placed upon heritage by “particular people at a particular time for particular reasons” (Harrison, 2010). Heritage is a cultural process of active identity construction. It is passed down generation-by-generation, at once transferring inscribed values and meanings while accumulating new ones in the present (Smith, 2006). Emblems of heritage must thus be constantly re-evaluated and redefined based on the needs of the present (Smith, 2006).

Such a different theory of heritage requires a different approach to preservation. Rather than relying on international or national organizations, decisions about what constitutes heritage should remain in the hands of local communities, making preservation a voluntary and spontaneous process instead of an event that attempts to “arrest the march of time” (Samuel, 1994). Laurajane Smith’s research with local communities in Castleford serves as an excellent example demonstrating how effective this approach can be (Smith, 2006). As a town that once thrived on coal mining, Castleford now suffers under the weight of deindustrialization and has born witness to the destruction of the original buildings, pits, and machineries that put the city on the map. Subscribers to AHD might argue that the destruction of these physical markers of heritage equates to the loss of that heritage. However, residents of Castleford would disagree, as evidenced by their efforts to preserve the complex cultural interactions between people, place, and memory as an active form of community building and cohesion. The ancient market hall now serves as a venue for exhibitions and ceremonies related to the city’s industrial past, encouraging community socialization and collective efforts to grapple with the trauma of its decline and the loss of its industrial heritage. Heritage preservation in Castleford is thus not about saving what was gone but rather focuses on “acknowledging the past and using that as a starting point for negotiating its new future,” one that helps the community to unite and re-gain self-recognition (Smith & Campbell, 2011).

The difference between AHD and heritage-as-process ultimately comes down to what each approach considers heritage most “worthy” of preservation. Community-led approaches to the preservation of heritage instead make room for that which AHD might consider irrelevant or unworthy of resource allocation. Under heritage-as-process, no emblem of heritage faces exclusion: it is instead up to the community what constitutes heritage. By acknowledging the importance to preserve *any* kind of heritage as an active process of heritage interaction, we can finally move away from the canonical lists of material heritage that have long dominated heritage debates. The benefits of this approach are twofold, as it diversifies not just what is considered heritage but who is involved in such conversations.

#### 4. Towards a More Effective Approach

These academic debates have proven to be inspiring and effective, pushing the policy makers to reflect upon and improve their ideologies and practices. Those who subscribe to AHD-oriented thinking seem to realize that tides are changing. Indeed, current UNESCO preservation measures have come a long way since the organization’s first attempt to define heritage in the 1950s at the Hague Convention, which concerned only heritage as “property” (UNESCO, 1954). This notion of heritage-as-property persisted for nearly two decades. As of 1972, UNESCO still conflated cultural heritage with architectural sites, as evidenced by their various conventions as well as the organization’s administrative structure (Isar, 2011). Then, in response to the critique of neglecting the role of communities and a preference over materiality, UNESCO has developed the ICH Convention, which claims to place the community at its center. In 2007, the World Heritage Committee also added “Communities” as one of its five strategic objects (UNESCO, 2007). Thanks to the ongoing critique by scholars and heritage practitioners, authorities have gradually modified their practices to become more and more holistic.

However, the embrace and increasing celebration of community within the current top-down approach has nevertheless failed to progress beyond superficiality, and community involvement in the processes of heritage protection remains under the supervision of authorities. For instance, in China, the inscription of an ICH practice onto the national list of heritage is a process initiated by the government and decided by experts (Maags, 2018). It is only after this initial consideration that practitioners are consulted by authorities and invited to explain their practices. Thus, while communities are indeed being invited into the preservation process and their voices are being considered, their participation remains largely passive and at the invitation of those in power (Poulios, 2010). They are, in other words, being invited to participate in heritage protection as dictated by AHD, leaving existing hierarchies of power and the core problems facing such an approach to heritage protection wholly unchallenged.

How to best preserve our heritage is thus not a question that has a single and

definite response. Ideally, both top-down and bottom-up approaches should work together, rejecting a single way to heritage protection. Take the aforementioned example of Chinese block printing, for instance. After the technique was “saved” by the government, young practitioners now experiment with the practice in innovating ways, such as producing patterns on shopping bags or the production of movie posters (Zhang, 2021). The carrier and output of the ancient technique have thus expanded from traditional paper and books to include new products and methods that better suit the needs and desires of contemporary society. Instead of discouraging practitioners’ efforts in adapting their heritage practice to new forms, governments should work to provide resources that can help them better meet this need. Offering professional design classes or providing workshops on creative products can empower practitioners who are usually not trained in those fields and struggle to make their voices heard in the management process. An active debate on preservation that constantly challenges existing ideologies is one that can spark innovations, ensuring that more emblems of heritage are not only preserved for the future but adapted to meet the changing needs of the present.

No matter how preservation approaches evolve, it is crucial that “care” and “respect” remain fundamental cornerstones of the process (Pantazatos, 2015). Preservation is an act of care because both heritage and communities who have ties to it are vulnerable to the loss of that heritage. The emphasis on care thus helps us understand that we, the current “stewards” of that heritage, engage in a relationship that unavoidably generates obligations on behalf of those within it (Pantazatos, 2015). When fulfilling these duties, the concept of respect is central to the ongoing relationship, requiring us to treat equally “any person who is associated with the heritage in any way” (Pantazatos, 2015). This emphasis on respect is not only an act of human decency but can help facilitate constructive discussions among diverse stakeholders involved in the preservation process. Emphasizing the complementary relationship between care and respect thus constantly reminds us to address the question of obligations and beneficiaries in heritage preservation, ensuring that we remain productive and respectful as we seek out the most efficient approach.

## **5. Preserve for the Future with Benefits for the Present**

Sections 2 to 4 have discussed the duty of present-day generations in the safeguarding of heritage as well as dominant methods of preservation. Academic criticism constantly challenges the dominating preservation approaches, guiding it to become more inclusive and sustainable over time. Much like these methods, the universally accepted “duty” we have to engage in preserving heritage for future generations has earned its fair share of criticism. Chief among these criticisms is that future-oriented preservation focuses on presenting an “unchanged” heritage to future generations, emphasizing the “authenticity” and “conserve-as-found” nature of such heritage (Harrison, 2010; Smith, 2009).

Scholars argue that engaging in such an approach encourages the perception of heritage as finished and complete, with a tendency towards the “museumification” of heritage sites and practices to ensure their transmission to future generations (Hewison, 1987; Wright, 1985). Furthermore, this conception of a duty “owed” to the future on behalf of the present can lead to a discontinuity between the present and the future, which undermines the ability of the present to alter or change the meaning and value of heritage sites or places (Smith, 2006). There is even scholarly suggestion that destruction of heritage may not be something bad but can contribute to history and the processes of future-making (Holtorf, 2020). However, this perception of future-oriented preservation as only serving future generations underestimates the effect such practices can have in the present’s ability to shape contemporary society and contribute to the wellbeing of the current generation.

Though heavily criticized by academics for its potential to commodify culture, it is undeniable that the preservation of heritage is rife with opportunities for rapid economic growth, especially in underdeveloped areas. Intensive research by scholars including Silberberg (1995) has demonstrated heritage as a way to generate both income and employment opportunities, a topic that is becoming increasingly discussed in the “cultural economy” discourse (Anheier & Isar, 2008). The historic center of Mexico City—the Centro Historico—is a prominent example of the generative potential of collaborations between public and private investors. In 2000, a group of such stakeholders came together to formulate plans for the restoration of the city after decades of declining population numbers, economic losses, and the devastating earthquake of 1985. The project focused on the restoration of ancient buildings and public spaces to rejuvenate a part of the city that had been all but abandoned to decay. The project produced stunning results: from 2005 to 2015, annual tourist visits soared from 700,000 to two million; the Centro also attracted more permanent residents since universities, museums, and new businesses have either been newly established or reinvigorated. To this day, revenues from this large-scale investment into the Centro’s preservation continue to finance social programs aimed at enhancing the quality of local lives (CHiFA, 2021). It is a model for the preservation of heritage that can be replicated in other places, simultaneously providing opportunities that directly benefit local communities, including social developments like the alleviation of poverty and inequality, alongside the preservation of historical monuments.

Preserving heritage also has the potential to provide insights into major global issues like combatting climate change and protecting the living environment. In recent decades, for example, there has been a growing effort to better understand indigenous knowledge, such as Shannon McNeeley’s work on the Koyukon people of the Arctic (McNeeley, 2012). The state of Alaska imposed hunting regulations on moose to mitigate the consequences of climate change, but hinder the community who lives in the region from subsistence harvesting. In her study, McNeeley documents how the Koyukon people harnessed their intimate

knowledge of the region, its weather, and its land to devise a seasonal wheel that allowed them to explain the necessity of shifting the Alaskan moose hunting season later in the year. The method has since proven more efficient in determining peak moose season than the dates assigned to hunting season by state and federal officials. This is just one example of how collaborations between non-indigenous and indigenous parties can solve critical issues while simultaneously creating opportunities for the cultivation and renewal of indigenous knowledge systems (Whyte, 2017).

Perhaps the most important way that heritage preservation impacts the present is its ability to foster a sense of belonging and convey timeless values and unbroken lineages that define identities, giving meaning to human existence (Graham et al., 2000; Lowenthal, 1985). The most obvious examples of this abstract concept involve heritage and its inextricable link to human rights and humanity at large (Silverman & Ruggles, 2007). As stated in the article 2 of the 1994 Frimbourg Draft Protocol: “everyone, both individually and collectively, has a right to the protection of his cultural heritage in all its forms” (Blake, 2000). Scholars like Brodie and Renfrew (2005) and Nussbaum (2009) argue that the destruction of heritage is a crime against humanity, which “affects multiple generations, erasing cultural memory and severing links with the past that are integral to forging and maintaining modern identities” (Meskell, 2002).

The negative consequences of these actions are documented in Peter Schmidt’s research based in East Africa (Schmidt, 1995). Schmidt reveals how the government of Kenya deprives Swahili individuals and communities the right to access their heritage by illegally manipulating land titles that contain Swahili heritage resources. He has demonstrated how the Kenyan government sold lands to foreign investors who intended to convert these heritage sites into seaside resorts for wealthy tourists. The government thus not only contributed to the active destruction of Swahili heritage but deprived the Swahili of the opportunity to reclaim and revitalize their history and traditions, which is particularly important given the marginal status they currently hold in Kenya (Meskell, 2010). This destruction of heritage, unfortunately, continues. Sarr and Savoy developed an influential report urging the repatriation of the African artifacts in French collections to their source nations in 2018. They pointed out that museums that cling to looted artifacts deprive the rights of African communities to access their heritage. Over 90% of sub-Saharan remains are housed outside the African continent, resulting in African youth’s unawareness of the richness and creativity of their own legacy (Sarr & Savoy, 2018). This loss of access to heritage leads to the inhibition of a group’s well-being and their capacities to flourish in the future.

The examples presented above have demonstrated the present-day benefits of protecting heritage and the consequences of neglecting it. We should indeed keep in mind, however, the critique of viewing heritage as a static resource. It should instead be emphasized that the duty of preservation is about remaking heritage for the present while ensuring its survival into the future. In other words, present-day action should facilitate rather than fossilize heritage, allow-



ing it to simultaneously serve the present as it paves the way for future connections to who we are, what we value, and where we come from.

## 6. Research Significance: Preservation as Change

The concept of preservation-as-change is nowhere more evident than in conversations regarding the repatriation of indigenous remains from museums and private collections. The act of museums collecting and displaying human remains dates back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when museums around the country acquired tens of thousands of human remains as the result of forceful colonization (Jenkins, 2016). Today these collections are viewed not only as a reminder of but the active continuation of colonial harm to indigenous communities. The call is growing for these museums to return these ancestral remains and other items of indigenous heritage to their original cultural context. There are nevertheless professionals who continue to argue against the return of these remains, many of which would be destined for reburial. These scholars argue that the repatriation and reburial of these remains will result in the loss of valuable knowledge about the human species, as scholars will no longer have access to them as specimens for study (Jenkins, 2016). This argument privileges academic knowledge over indigenous rights, as it denies the ability of indigenous people to “reunite with their ancestors physically and spiritually,” and robs them of traditional practices involved in their interactions with the dead (Jenkins, 2016). In contrast, the repatriation of these remains helps to affirm the identity of indigenous communities and allows museums to work towards breaking ties with their colonial pasts.

Like heritage itself, the duty of heritage preservation for future generations is an evolving process. Present-day society cannot decide for the future generations what constitutes “valuable” heritage, though we can be certain that the priorities and interests of the future will be different than those of the present. Preservation is thus historically situated and temporal by nature, influenced by and constructed from present situations. What is considered rightful and allowable today may be deemed problematic in the future. Thus, preservation should be a process that accepts temporality, one that may expire at specific points in the future (Holtorf, 2020).

The actions of the present shape the conception of what constitutes heritage and its study for future generations. We have an inherent duty in the present to preserve any kind of heritage for future generations. Heritage, however, is not a static concept, nor is its preservation. This essay has demonstrated that there does not exist an absolute saying about what the best preservation approach is, nor there should be one. The aim should nevertheless focus on remaining open and encouraging constant debates about and challenges to current preservation methods, whether top-down, bottom-up, or another as-of-yet undefined method. Importantly, rather than focus solely on the physical preservation of heritage sites, monuments, or objects, our duty is also to make such efforts sustaina-

ble. By maintaining an open mind and inviting the active engagement of heritage in the present, we can gain new insights and fulfill our duty to the future without sacrificing the interests of the present generations.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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