



FRAMEWORK CONVENTION
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Public Space and the Tasks of Cultural Heritage Today: Between Remembrance and Regeneration

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Over the past three decades there has been a tremendous transformation in cultural heritage, both in terms of practices and in the understanding of cultural heritage. These changes are very much connected to wider changes in the very nature of culture and reflect major social and political transformation. They are also very much evident in the re-shaping of public space in more inclusive ways for diverse histories and experiences.

Regeneration is often seen in economic terms, which can of course be important when it is not reduced to the consumption of space, but as the only way to see cultural heritage it loses sight of another aspect of regeneration, namely the capacity to bring about, what philosophers since Aristotle have called, the good life. Eudaimonia means human flourishing, happiness, welfare and prosperity; in other words, a life that is worth living, and which brings moral worth to human actions. It requires creating spaces for remembrance and where space is not an instrument for economic competitiveness.

Heritage is above all a category of memory. It is about how the present defines itself through a relation with the past. All remembrance is selective, since no society or community can recall the entirety of the past. And no social group can exist without a relation to the past. The fundamental problem that heritage presents, then, is what should be retained from the past and how, in the words of Adorno, its legacies should be worked through.

Contrary to the received view of heritage as the handing down of the past to the present, where the past holds sway over the present, heritage should be seen as of the present, how the present time sees itself. This inevitably means that the memories of any one time will be different from earlier times. It means too that the heritage of our time today will reflect the concerns of the present.


For these reasons, heritage is both a form of historical experience – how we experience ourselves in time – and an interpretation of such experience. It is most often expressed in the form of narratives and in symbolic forms.

The traditional understanding and function of heritage in modern societies was to serve the needs of the national state. It was a form of mass adoration of the national state. It affirmed the grandeur and splendour of the state. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially since UNESCO, this view of cultural heritage that was typically reflected in material forms such as monuments and buildings, was complemented by a more universal notion of cultural heritage as the patrimony of humanity. This shift was accompanied by the idea of intangible culture. Of course all culture is intangible, but nonetheless the notion of intangible heritage extended – or democratised heritage – to include wider domains of historical experience and had the effect of giving greater prominence for local communities to affirm themselves and generally gave greater weight to the recognition of cultural diversity.

Now, while the two notions of heritage – the national and the universal – became increasingly blurred, further developments took place and have opened up new visions of cultural heritage and the possibility of more critical and cosmopolitan practices. These new currents in cultural heritage are what I wish to explore in this short lecture. They stand in a relation of tension with the managerial attempt to exploit the economic implications of cultural diversity rather than see opportunities for the good life. Effectively what has happened is that capitalism has stepped in to the void opened up by the decline of the national function of heritage.

The first is what I call the interactive moment. It has increasingly been recognised across a wide spectrum of perspectives in the human and social sciences that cultures and societies more generally are formed through cross-cultural interactions. These may be between a limited number of locations or they may be global. What was once seen as separated and

unique is now seen as a product of global interconnectivity and thus no longer unique or exceptional. Cultures are formed through processes of interaction and exchange out of which come entanglements of various forms and often new hybrid forms emerge. A basic pattern is that culture undergoes change when it encounters another culture. This may happen as a result of cultural transfers such as borrowings, translation, and theft. Indeed, all culture is a form of theft.



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The implication of this is that while there has been much attention given to cultural pluralization, it has been to the neglect of interculturalism, that is the encounter of cultures and the fact that all cultures are shaped by such interactions. So, what is needed, then, is greater recognition of the entanglement of cultures. This perspective does not replace the unity in diversity idea of cultural diversity, which has been central to the Council of Europe's cultural policy, but gives to it a stronger emphasis on encounters and entanglements and the possibility of learning as a result. In this way, remembrance can lead to the regeneration of communities by expanding their horizons.

The emphasis on the encounter has become the focus on much scholarly attention in recent years. As Michael Rothberg has shown in his

path-breaking book, *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), memories are not self-contained, but are shaped by influences drawn from other memories through borrowing, referencing and negotiation. Thus, the Holocaust memory has been influential in the re-revival of other memories and histories, such as the heritage of slavery. New and silenced memories build on older ones and undergo re-signification.

A second development that must be highlighted is the more critical temperament of cultural heritage that has come with, what James E. Young in a classic essay in 1992 called, the rise of the counter-memorial, or as it is sometimes called the 'counter-monument' (from the German, *Gegendenkmal*). This idea, which recalls Foucault's notion of counter-memories, relates to the ways in which previously excluded peoples – mostly minorities – affirm and insert themselves into national or mainstream narratives by subverting or challenges the official or unexamined taken for granted heritage. Such acts are reflected in the shift from the monument (to the hero or victor) to the anti-monumental memorial. With this comes a greater recognition of the dark side of history and the need for the present to atone for the crimes of the past, as well as for the victim to have a voice.

Now, while memorials have been erected to the memories of the fallen soldier, especially since 1918, they have now been opened up to a wider sphere of experiences for all kinds of groups and take less the form of the heroic commemoration of, for example, sacrifice for the nation, for king and country. It has led cultural heritage into the difficult waters of contested histories and traumas, since the hero and the victim are often not so easily separated: the victim may be a perpetrator in the eyes of a previously silenced group. Those who made great sacrifices may have not have done so for a noble cause.

The broadening of the scope of the memorial along with the wider democratisation of memory has given to cultural heritage a new and more cosmopolitan task. Instead of being a celebration of a past now in ruins, it is now more likely to be a reflection on atonement, mourning and grief. It is possible that such sentiments are all that can unite what are often deeply divided societies today. All that is left of universal values is sorrow, loss and remorse.



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In these very much changed circumstances, in highly pluralized societies in which everyone is a stranger, cultural heritage can no longer so easily create unity for a nation or community. Instead, its task is to offer ways for the political community to live with the past and find in the figure of the stranger new and more positive ways of being. To do so will also be a way of reconciling the often difficult work of remembrance with the task of cultural regeneration.

A third development is particularly relevant to the Faro Convention and the regeneration of communities. The Faro Convention has done much to shift the focus of heritage towards people – not nations – and thus opens up a space for such human values as those based on human vulnerability to have greater

significance. Cultural heritage is now being defined in new contexts in which atonement, sorrow, mourning and grief become the markers by which the present is expressed through a more critical response to the past. The new sites of remembrance are less concerned about representation, since often there is nothing left to represent but absence, pain and suffering. Since the 9/11 memorial in New York, this has set a new trend that goes back to 2001 with Daniel Libeskind's Jewish Museum in Berlin (see Young 2016).



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Such acts of signification are re-shaping public space and have given local communities new ways of expressing their histories. For example, there has been a notable change in abstract designs in spatial memorials, which are also now designed to enhance active participation and dialogue so that the viewer is no longer a passive spectator. The space of experience is enlarged to make possible new and often more personal interpretations. Abstract designs encourage remembrance in ways that encourage the viewer to look inwards, not outwards. Instead of awe and distance, they cultivate a more direct experience that requires interpretation. This has been the subject of a recent wonderful study by Quentin Stevens and Karen Franck.

Cultural heritage can take a variety of more cosmopolitan forms when it is reclaimed by those previously excluded or marginalised,

such as migrant or ethnic communities, national minorities, or those, such as youth groups, who have not been able to articulate their identities around the dominant narratives. Public space can thus be reclaimed and made more relevant for cultural regeneration without presuming a common culture or nostalgia for monumentality. There is also no reason why it should be the space of the nation, but the space of forms of community and for the pursuit of the good life.

Such shifts in memory and commemoration are also a reflection of the close tie that now exists between cultural heritage and mobility. Memory today is more likely to be a product of the experience of mobility – travel, displacement, migration – than of settled societies. In a world of movement, flux and fluidity, both of people and artefacts, it is inevitable that culture also shifts along with the new experiences that come with mobility. It presents a challenge for cultural heritage and has been in part reflected in the relatively recent phenomenon of the mobile exhibition and memorial of cultural heritage.

Heritage is thus not constant or durable. Time is the enemy of the past. No longer based on stability or the enduring traditions that have survived the test of time, heritage has moved beyond the traditional understanding of the curatorial tasks of selection, collecting, preserving and representing. Whether it is issues of ownership, voice or representation, heritage is now contested.

Another development that can be briefly commented on is the extension of rights to the sphere of culture, as in cultural rights and now heritage rights. While this is clearly important, and part of the general democratisation of culture, it should not detract from the more fundamental problem of cultural fluidity and entanglement and the conflicts that may result. This can happen when the rights of one group

are asserted over the rights of another, since in many cases the privileging of one culture will be at the expense of another.

Such conflicts are a reminder that not all cultural encounters are positive: they can advance adversity as much as enriching the societies or cultures that encounter each other. In view of these multifarious developments, what I think needs to be more strongly affirmed today is that cultural heritage is very much infused with critical-normative tasks. Heritage is centrally about evaluation or judgement: it is not simply repetition and derivation. Nor is it only about the space of the encounter and diversity. It requires the affirmation of the present in the critical appropriation of the past in order to liberate the present. The practice of cultural heritage by curators, educators, urban planners, and architects of memorials and other sites of heritage, thus carries responsibilities. It is a form of engagement and allows for cultural re-

interpretation in light of changing experiences and the sense that everyone is a stranger.

I have in mind the words of Jacques Derrida:



**'Inheritance is
never a given, it is
always a task'**

(1994: 67)

In this talk I have stressed the marked sense of cultural heritage as sorrow in which the experience of loss and grief prevails, but heritage is not an end in itself and we should not neglect the critical task that is also part of heritage, namely regeneration and the making of a good life for citizens.

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