



FRAMEWORK CONVENTION
ON THE VALUE OF CULTURAL HERITAGE
FOR SOCIETY

LA CONVENTION-CADRE
SUR LA VALEUR DU PATRIMOINE CULTUREL
POUR LA SOCIÉTÉ



Heritage as a system and process that belongs to local communities

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Reframing the role of local communities and stakeholders

Acknowledging that heritage is now better understood as being both determined by and the responsibility of local communities, their participation from the outset is clearly essential to reach a common understanding of the objectives connected to it (Ripp and Rodwell 2016). To shape this action space for the best possible benefit, the identification and integration of all stakeholders is essential. Definitions of stakeholder are various, from those institutions and individuals who have a dominant political and financial interest in a place, to anyone who has physical or intellectual access to it. For the purposes of this chapter, three classifications are useful: primary, direct users (local community); secondary, indirect users (incoming traders, consumers and tourists, service providers, and other employment and visitor-related categories); and tertiary, influential (governmental, non-governmental, academia, and outside investors). Engaging with citizens as the primary stakeholders matches closest with the shift in roles discussed above.

The complexities and inter-relationships inherent in today's comprehension of cultural heritage—community-oriented, dynamic rather


than static, systemic not linear—demand management systems, especially within administrations and institutions, that replace “the usual sector or one-dimensional approaches with new transversal or multidimensional ones, aligning different policy

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areas and resources ... taking into account the role of each part in the whole structure” (European Union 2010). It is the communities of practice (Wenger 1998), the informal, self-generating networks that condition whether an organization functions as a dynamic system, and are critical to its ability to function effectively in today's world.

From object-based to systemic understanding of cultural heritage

Today cultural heritage is perceived far more broadly than was the case by previous generations —including the pioneers of the preservation movement — as is its protection and safeguarding for future generations. For the urban context, “Traditionally, planners viewed historic areas as a collection of monuments and buildings to be preserved as relics of the past, whose value was considered to be totally separate from their day-to-day use and city context” (Siravo 2014:161). This materialistic approach to heritage was rooted in the physical appearance of monuments, material conditions and a traditional understanding of heritage preservation as a mainly material science, the province of conservators. Laurajane Smith has labelled this the “authorized heritage discourse” (Smith 2006). Throughout the world, but especially in Europe, this perception of cultural heritage remains very strong.



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The traditional approach to the identification and delineation of cultural and natural heritage as properties, is firmly embedded in the 1972 UNESCO Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (the World Heritage Convention - UNESCO 1972). Under “Definitions”, Article 1 simply embraces monuments, groups of buildings and sites as “cultural heritage”. In retrospect the 1964 Venice Charter and its founding doctrinal text — adopted by the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) in 1965 — with its passing references to “setting” and “some socially useful purpose” (ICOMOS 1964) may be interpreted as presaging a shift in

direction. Extending this position Article 5(a) of the 1972 Convention expressed the aspiration “to adopt a general policy which aims to give the cultural and natural heritage a function in the life of the community and to integrate the protection of that heritage into comprehensive planning programmes”. The major shift, establishing fuller comprehension of a dependent relationship between “heritage” (tangible and intangible) and communities, is a far more recent interpretation. 2005, for example, saw the adoption of the Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (the Faro Convention - Council of Europe 2005). Under “Aims of the Convention”, Article 1c reads: “the conservation of cultural heritage and its sustainable use have human development and quality of life as their goal”. Referring to society as “constantly evolving”, “the need to put people and human values at the centre of an enlarged and cross-disciplinary concept of cultural heritage”, and “the need to involve everyone in society in the ongoing process of defining and managing cultural heritage”, the Faro Convention articulated a sea change in perceptions. Also UNESCO recognised in the framing of the 2005 Conventions (UNESCO 2005a ; UNESCO 2005b) “the fundamental role of civil society”, an issue that later reappears in the editions of the Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention, but which was only introduced retrospectively.

The modern understanding of cultural heritage is fluid and dynamic. At its core, it represents a holistic understanding that perceives cultural heritage as “a social and political construct encompassing all those places, artefacts and cultural expressions inherited from the past which, because they are seen to reflect and validate our identity as nations, communities, families and even individuals, are worthy of some form of respect and protection” (Labadi and Logan 2015: xiii). From an initially object-based approach, heritage is now understood as representing a system of diverse entities with

an increasingly strong emphasis on communities and the varied use of heritage by them over time (Kalman 2014). In the context of the COMUS Project, this paradigm shift has important implications, most noteworthy in terms of the role and integration of communities and stakeholders in the process of heritage-based urban development. (Council of Europe 2016) Together with today's understanding of management and communications, evolving from traditional, linear cause-and-effect models to incorporate complex, systemic processes, a door has been

opened to encourage exploration of different approaches and techniques, paving the way for the introduction and development of the COMUS Methodology. Strategies for the integration and coordination of stakeholders, encompassing community participation, and focused on generating benefits for local communities and improving the quality of life, are at the heart of the COMUS Project, but are also recognised in several other urban heritage networks, like the Organisation of World Heritage Cities (Göttler and Ripp 2017, Ripp and Rodwell in preparation).

Implications for heritage organisations, professionals and local communities

Following this assessment on the role of communities in heritage practice and after developing a modern understanding of cultural heritage, these findings have serious implications for organisations, active in the field of cultural heritage, heritage professionals and heritage communities. The following points may illustrate these changes:

- ♣ People must have the first priority in cultural heritage, not objects;
- ♣ A holistic understanding of the heritage at stake, is the only way forward to take the complexity of heritage into account;
- ♣ Communication in connection with cultural heritage needs to take into account a comprehensive understanding of what communication today is, rather systemic and multi-directional than linear;
- ♣ Heritage projects need interdisciplinary teams with diverse scientific and work-related backgrounds;
- ♣ Actors and affected people in cultural heritage need a flexible mind-set rather than a rigorous linear step-by-step approach.

A modern understanding of cultural heritage includes to give a more prominent role to local communities. This modern understanding also needs different actors, different mind-sets, different skills and most important a different attitude to activate cultural heritage for the benefit of all (Hauer and Ripp in preparation).

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