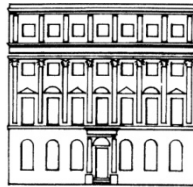


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*From the Ruins of Preservation: A Symposium on Rethinking Heritage through
Counter-Archives*

Conference Report

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From the Ruins of Preservation: A Symposium on Rethinking Heritage through Counter-Archives, held at the German Historical Institute London, 11–12 July 2019. Co-organized by Rodney Harrison (AHRC Heritage Priority Area Leadership Fellow/Professor of Heritage Studies at the UCL Institute of Archaeology) and Mirjam Brusius (Research Fellow in Colonial and Global History, GHIL).

Colonial legacies in heritage preservation have intersected and clashed with local realities since their inception. Heritage sites have often been created by way of processes that segregate them from the contemporary world, and the people who live with and amongst them. This might result in restrictions of habitation, religious and ritual practice, and the removal of local settlements from heritage sites. This symposium, the second heritage event jointly organized by the AHRC Heritage Priority Area (UCL) and the German Historical Institute London, took place under the premiss that communities have always had their own ways of preserving and engaging with material and immaterial significances. Its key purpose, however, was to meet a resulting methodological challenge: how to study these living realities, when limited methods exacerbate the problem of adequately reconstructing these histories? Lived realities often seem to defy the disciplinary baggage, canons, and concepts of heritage studies, which have proved unhelpful in engaging such records outside ‘the archive’ as it is conventionally understood. How can one thus write about undocumented objects, places, and landscapes embedded in the domains of contemporary life? Papers delivered by historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, and scholars in heritage studies engaged with a range of alternative sources, all of which can be considered ‘counter-archives’ in a new heritage discourse.

Karen Salt’s (Nottingham) opening keynote lecture addressed a fundamental issue that ran through the event: the ‘ruins of history’ and marks of injustice within archives. Salt explained this by point-

The full conference programme can be found under ‘Events and Conferences’ on the GHIL’s website <www.ghil.ac.uk>.

ing to the Geographies of Black Protest (GBP) network, which connects local protest cultures. It gives insight into the afterlives of injustice: the echoes and ‘ghosts’ in the archives, and the lived realities of insecure futures some communities face. Considering protest as heritage and injustice as a ‘form of ruination’, Salt asked how these types of histories could be excavated without transmitting the violence that gave them meaning. What if only the most powerful continue to be visible in archives, thus contributing to further repression? And what are the patterns that heritage studies replicate? It is not neutral territory.

Questions of power structures were also addressed in the first session, chaired by Indra Sengupta (GHIL), on heritage, the state, and the community. How is heritage used to assert political interests in state and society? What if it clashes with community interests? Nancy A. Rushohora (Stellenbosch) looked at government neglect of the community in the conservation of Majimaji War heritage in Tanzania, where the political significance of the war – unitary resistance to German colonialism – overshadowed the community’s needs to mourn and ritualize the people and the landscape in which the war took place. Sponsored commemoration appropriated and erased histories for communities for whom Majimaji warriors were not so much heroes of the nation as spiritual ancestors. Patricia Sellick and Elly Harrowell (Coventry) discussed similar conflicts in Susya, formerly the location of a synagogue and now a contested heritage site in the occupied Palestinian territories. The Palestinian inhabitants were expelled when Susya was reclassified as a heritage site by the Israeli authorities, and oral ‘counter’ histories record the existence of Bedouin communities in the same place. Could a ‘conflict transformational approach’ – beyond the goal of reaching agreement – provide the basis for re-imagining such heritage sites as places where multiple pasts, presents, and futures intertwine? ‘Competing heritage’ was also addressed by Mehiyar Kathem (London) who, in collaboration with Nasser A. Jassem (Mosul) and Caroline Sandes (ICOMOS), spoke on the role of state-access infrastructures in conceptualizing heritage in post-2003 Iraq. Here, heritage was used to extract wealth for the state, rather than as a means to promote peace. How are representations of the past controlled to align with a specific state narrative? Documentary material is abused and also destroyed in the pursuit of denying the heritage of others, while caretakers who main-

tain counter-archival material threatened with destruction take personal risks. The paper made the important point that the construction of counter-archives depends equally on sources of legitimate power and resources.

In order to turn against such forms of authority often empowered in conventional archival sources, critical heritage studies have largely denied the significance of archives for the study of non-official forms of heritage preservation, which has led to the de-privileging of historical analysis. This frustration has resulted in a general turning away from such sources in heritage studies to focus on contemporary issues through 'oral history' and ethnography. However, this move has been perceived as problematic by historians, who have seen heritage studies as a field in which the historical contexts of contemporary phenomena have effectively been written out of the picture. The discussion also served to bridge this gap by going one step further and shifting its focus to sources that fall outside 'the archive', conventionally defined. What materials can tell the story of heritage as a lived experience? Can we rethink objects, music, landscape, and built environment as archives?

The next session, chaired by Rodney Harrison (UCL), thus defied the logic of any formal preservation approach in which aesthetically pleasing heritage sites take precedence over everyday practices of heritage, often entangled with sensual experience. It advocated a fluid and dynamic understanding of heritage beyond authoritative discourses. Drawing on examples of such counter-archives, the session opened with Wendy Shaw (Berlin), who took the normative authority of text as a starting point. Inscribing the literary imagination in stone, archaeological sites tend to erase local cultures, which often sustain historical practices, for example, through speech. The premiss of preservation is that things of tangible value should be kept once the people who left the material legacy no longer live there. How then, Shaw asked provocatively, can this erasure be juxtaposed with sustenance recognized by artists engaging with local populations? Similarly, Rishika Mukhopadhyay (Exeter) looked for alternatives by engaging with heritage that is not 'preserved' by state agencies but enmeshed in people and landscape through manual practice. Through the making practices of Chitpur Road, the oldest road in Kolkata, she traced the genealogical histories of the artisans by using oral narratives and photographs to reconstruct the cultural history of

the road itself. How important is the category of 'heritage' for people who work on the street? Jonathan Gardner (London), too, looked beyond nationalist, triumphalist narratives. How can London mega events and their rubble be considered a form of both intentional and unintentional preservation? In juxtaposing rubble vs. ruins one might ask: is rubble really material without significance? Can these discarded remains themselves be both 'monuments' and ruins, and be rehabilitated as an archive? The discussion increasingly made apparent that paper archives, oral histories, and material culture can go hand-in-hand. This notion was also stressed by Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann (Hampshire) in her keynote lecture on the Danish transatlantic slave trade in Ghana; a response to a visit to Christiansborg Castle by the Queen of Denmark in 2018 and the discourse surrounding the notion of a 'shared history'. Engmann explored the relations between these material sites and the narratives of remembering, but also forgetting. How does 'negative', 'dissonant', and 'dark' heritage become tempered by the politics of a 'Mutual Heritage Discourse', which silences the violence and subjectivities that were central to the transatlantic slave trade, hindering critical engagement with the past and present? Engmann took this further by stressing self-reflexivity: the urgent need of scholars and practitioners to engage in self-conscious challenges to this discourse and its methods in order to facilitate meaningful post/de-colonial archaeological heritage work.

The third session, chaired by Mirjam Brusius (GHIL), was specifically dedicated to the re-contextualization of photographs. How can scholars address the long-ignored gaps and unspoken emotions and bodies in photographs and other images? Visual analyses often lack the methods to engage with different iterations of heterogeneous agencies of both humans and non-humans outside the scope of official archives: the locals going about their lives in ancient ruins; the workers who labour on archaeological excavations; those often nameless individuals who serve as human scales next to an excavated building; the local guides who help 'open up' landscapes to preservationists; or the agencies and affordances of forms of material culture themselves. Jonas Van Mulder (Leuven) addressed this by re-approaching late nineteenth-century photographic documentation of the construction of the portage railroad in 'Congo Free State'. Belgium priests were not just sent out to work as almoners, but also

documented the progress with cameras. To what extent was this action a cover-up for the gruesome reality of forced labour, hazardous working conditions, high death tolls, and desertion? And how can lateral sources allow for a counter-archival reading of photographs supporting 'institutional' (propaganda) narratives? How the visual can complement text and vice versa was also of concern for Heba Abd el Gawad (Cairo). In conflict of interest sites in Egypt, 'official' photographs documenting archaeological practices tell us little about socio-political and socio-emotional tensions, thus contributing to further repression. Yet in a system where only the powerful are visible, newspapers, magazines, television, film, radio, music, and social media can defy state narratives. Public discourse can thus become a counter-archive to highlight the aspirations of local communities instead. Finally, Colin Sterling (London), using the World Heritage Site of Angkor in Cambodia and Famagusta in Cyprus, showed how re-conceptualizing photographic collections as ruins can help us to question the broader heritage processes that have emerged in relation to these spaces. Can we locate heritage within broader patterns of conflict, empire, and capitalism? Only by recognizing the entanglement of preservation and precarity can we begin to imagine alternative pathways not just for the use of photography in scholarship but for heritage itself.

Indeed, the need to move away from assumed forms of archives and 'a heritage' was addressed in Trinidad Rico's (Rutgers) keynote lecture on rumour, secrecy, and contradictions in heritage studies. One of the defining issues of the 'critical heritage turn', she argued, has been precisely an explicit interest in recognizing and supporting alterity. But, in an effort to address the biases against 'alternative' heritage valuations, critical heritage studies may have failed to challenge their own assumptions. Instead, they remain attached to an old (preservation) paradigm that is restricted by its own epistemology. Drawing on examples in Indonesia, Qatar, and Argentina, Rico also called for self-reflection and methodological intervention into reductionist preservation histories by developing a new diachronic, more diverse vocabulary for future research.

The last session, chaired by Hana Morel (UCL), re-examined the politics of archives and archival research from a critical perspective. To what extent does the nature of archival material, for example, exert a disciplinary effect on the people, objects, and spaces of muse-

ums? Again, how can historical research be combined with on-site ethnographic research in order to re-evaluate methodological shortcomings, and explore collaborative research with local communities? Kate Hill (Lincoln) examined this by looking at the Highland Folk Museum, among the earliest British attempts to create a 'living history' museum. Here, personal, professional, and bureaucratic archival voices are merged, thus revealing the partiality of 'normal' museum archives and offering a glimpse of the ways in which staff engaged with physical experiences of wearing, using, and inhabiting artefacts and buildings. Likewise, Mustafa Kemal Baran (Istanbul) questioned the ways in which the phenomena of labour and local communities in archaeological practice in Turkey can be investigated. Shifting perspectives, he constructed a narrative based primarily on documents authored by local communities rather than only those that later became official archaeological field notes. Finally, Rachel King (London), too, touched upon complementary methods and material remains in the context of scientific cultures in Africa and their epistemic legacy through archival marginalia such as a family archive from Lesotho (southern Africa). Here the session picked up an earlier thread: texts have been accorded much authority to dictate how we think about time and heritage. Why are material cultures only 'slotted into these periods' if they are, in fact, better-suited to breaking out of temporal boxes and evoking a wider range of knowledges? How can textual archives be places that can both resist temporal partitioning and also rely on the material world to make knowledge about the past?

Alternative ways of reading archives 'against the grain', and an engagement with counter-archives can thus not only produce more diverse visions of the past, but also lead to more nuanced reflections on how archival sources and heritage studies themselves do their intellectual work. By re-centring the discourse about 'heritage' to examine specific non-state practices, the symposium developed a more inclusive understanding of how preservation has been determined over time and from different perspectives to highlight multivocality. If becoming a heritage site entails a threat to many people, for example, can the discourse focus more on the 'sustenance of the meaning of things' instead of simply the preservation of materiality (as Shaw put it)? It is thus greatly hoped that re-engaging such histories will also help us to reconceptualize contemporary heritage

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phenomena, although challenges remain. If infrastructural frameworks persist in areas of conflict, for example, to what extent can we consider counter-archives as a clear-cut alternative, liberated from dependencies and control? Within such a difficult undertaking, defining what a 'counter-archive' is would defy its very idea of using creative formats to break into fixed taxonomies and frameworks in order to amplify voices, visibility, and validity. It is hoped that a video recording of the contributions might itself become a counter-archive, in as much as counter-archives should be 'preserved'.

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