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*„Heritage“ im Wandel
gesellschaftlicher Orientierungen*

Festschrift für Wilfried Lipp

[transcript]

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On Paradigms, Theories, and Heritage

WILLEM DERDE

Introduction

In 2009, a campaign was launched within the ICOMOS community to support a 'tolerance for change'. It was spearheaded by Gustavo Araoz, then president of *ICOMOS International*. Ten years later, the outcome of the debate in the wake of this campaign is not clear. However, because the challenge still stands and because it addresses core issues in the approach to heritage, it has not lost its intellectual relevance and deserves to be looked at once more. For this paper, I will return to the original claims made by Gustavo Araoz in favour of a 'paradigm shift' and assess their value. I will argue that, given what we know about paradigm shifts in the philosophy of science, no such change has occurred. On the contrary, reflection about the current state of heritage approaches shows the need for theory building in the first place.

A Plea for a Tolerance for Change

It has become a trivial observation that we are living in a rapidly changing world. Unrestrained globalisation, migrations on a massive scale, unprecedented urbanisation, etc. are but a few of the most obvious tendencies determining the current predicament we live in. Given the pace and impact of the changing world, it should not come as a surprise that heritage, things from the past, things that were created in a different timeframe, and under different conditions, and which answered needs and

demands that might no longer be valid today, are under an unprecedented pressure of extinction and loss.

It should also not come as a surprise that fundamental questions about the nature and value of 'heritage' itself are asked as well. Indeed, can monuments be conserved and restored for their own sake when our society is confronted with so many other pressing demands? Does the value of a monument really lie in its physical structures, when what also counts are the ideals and worldviews of traditions or communities, of which they are an expression? Is China losing its soul because it tries to accommodate to the need of modern housing by high-rise buildings and by expanding its urban dwellings? Should Europe stop modernise its environment for the sake of things whose only merit is that they are old? In other words, shouldn't it be obvious that the conditions of our contemporary world inevitably also have an impact on how to deal with our monuments and sites if heritage wants to remain relevant? It is in this spirit that I understand the position paper of Gustavo Araoz that marked his presidency of *ICOMOS International: Protecting Heritage Places under the New Heritage Paradigm & Defining its Tolerance for Change. A Leadership Challenge for ICOMOS*.¹ Other people in other leading world organisations have addressed similar questions and have come forward with equally challenging propositions, pleading for 'managing change' where 'managing conservation' used to be the norm.²

What I would like to assess in this paper is whether a 'paradigm shift' in the domain of heritage took place and, if that indeed has been the case, whether this novel perspective is more successful in dealing with heritage compared to its rival

1 This version of the paper remained unpublished and was known as the 'Malta Paper' of October 2009. For many years it was available online on the website of the del Bianco Foundation at <http://www.fondazione-delbianco.org>. In 2011 Araoz published it as: Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm, in: *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development* 1 (2011), Issue 1, 55–60. All references in this article are made to this version. The same text has also been published under the same title in: Lipp, Wilfried / Štulc, Josef / Szmygin, Bogusław / Giometti, Simone (Ed.), *Conservation Turn – Return to Conservation. Tolerance for Change, Limits of Change. Proceedings of the International Conferences of the ICOMOS International Scientific Committee of the Theory and the Philosophy of Conservation and Restoration*, May 2010, Prague / Český Krumlov, Czech Republic, and March 2011, Florence, Italy, Firenze 2012, 47–52.

2 See for example Bandarin, Francesco / Van Oers, Ron, *The Historic Urban Landscape. Managing Heritage in an Urban Century*, Chichester 2012.

approaches. I will make this assessment against the background of the concepts of 'paradigms', 'theories' and 'paradigm shifts', as they were coined by Thomas Kuhn's seminal book of 1962, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. It is this book that has made the use of the concepts of 'paradigm' and 'paradigm shift' popular and that has given their current meaning.³

Preserving Heritage Places under a New Paradigm?

The position paper of Gustavo Araoz starts with the observation that over the past ten years 'our established conservation approach' has been challenged and that, at times, 'the integrity and authenticity of heritage places' appear to be eroded by a number of 'interventions, projects and management approaches'. The author also sees 'deep changes in the way that the government and the public sector perceive and use their heritage resources'. What these 'deep changes' in the perception and uses of heritage are, is left in the dark though. The author simply claims that they have been brought about by 'the evolution of the role that heritage plays in society, the appropriation of heritage by communities and the growing acceptance of heritage as a public commodity with economic value from which profit can be derived'. These observations bring the author to the conclusion that the 'nature and consequences of these changes have been enough to characterize the cumulative results as a *paradigm shift* for heritage places'⁴.

To make sense of a 'paradigm shift' in relation to heritage places, however, what is minimally required is a fundamental change in the understanding of *the nature* of heritage places. It is very doubtful that this has happened. The classic example that is used by Thomas Kuhn to illustrate a paradigm shift is in the domain of chemistry. Before Lavoisier came up with the idea of 'air itself entire' that we now recognise as oxygen, the phlogiston theory dominated the research.⁵ Both competitive theories

3 Kuhn, Thomas, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. With an Introductory Essay by Ian Hacking, 4th Ed. (50th Anniversary Ed.), Chicago / London 2012.

4 All quotes Araoz, *Preserving Heritage Places*, 55 (italics Willem Derde).

5 For a more detailed account, see Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 52–66 (Chapter 6: Anomaly and the Emergence of Scientific Discoveries).

were capable to *explain* a number of phenomena, such as, for example, consumption by fire. But it was Lavoisier's theory that proved superior in the explanation of natural phenomena, which the phlogiston theory could not.

It is very doubtful that something similar has happened in the domain of heritage. On the contrary, what has been described by Araoz could easily be interpreted as a sign that *heritage is extremely at risk*, if nothing else. In fact, the author acknowledges this from the start when he says that:

'[...] the cultural heritage community has been repeatedly alarmed by an increasing number of interventions, projects and management approaches that challenge our established conservation approach and that at times even appear to erode the integrity and authenticity of heritage places.'⁶

Furthermore, what is presented as the cause for 'deep changes', i.e., that heritage resources are seen as a public commodity with economic value or that they have been appropriated by communities, tells us more about the *use* of heritage, and less about the *nature* of heritage as such. Therefore, let us look at 'the signs' presumably indicating 'that a new heritage paradigm has emerged'⁷. Here the paper becomes puzzling and confusing.

Take for example the sign of 'official recognition as heritage of sites where there is little or no material fabric to preserve'. This seems to be more an indication of the *extension* of the meaning of heritage rather than being proof of a paradigm shift. To appreciate this point better, it is important to remember that one of the characteristics of paradigms is that they are *incompatible* with each other. One cannot accept phlogiston theory and oxygen theory at the same time as equally true. This is not the challenge that is presented by sites with little fabric to preserve. Take pre-modern battlefields as an example. All that is preserved in the top soil are little remains of armoury or uniforms and musket bullets that are scattered over the terrain where engagement with fire arms took place. Though little or no material fabric is left to preserve, this does not imply a radi-

6 Araoz, Preserving Heritage Places, 55.

7 Ibid., and all quotes following.

cal paradigm shift in relation to the more traditional care for monuments and sites that do consist of a more substantial material fabric.

The same holds true for the other 'signs' that are enlisted. 'The requirement to manage social processes that are deemed integral to the significance of the place' indicate that a wider spectrum of elements is deemed relevant to a site rather than a shift of paradigm. That heritage sites can be used 'as tools for poverty reduction by development agencies' again is more an illustration of the inventive *use* of heritage. This strategy, for example, is successfully used by the Global Heritage Fund at preserving heritage in danger by integrating them in the local economy.⁸ The 'pandemic of façadism that continues to gut thousands of individual buildings in historic cities'⁹ is a problem that has been recognised for very long. But it is *dependent* upon our existing notions about heritage that stress the importance of the authentic and it is an illustration of how little developers *care* about the integrity of a building in the prospect of economic gain. Again, the same holds true for 'the aggressive and excessive rejuvenation and adaptive use of historic buildings through excessive replacement-in-kind'. The 'extreme anastylosis of archaeological ruins' looks more like a problem to be solved amongst conservators and restorers: At what point does anastylosis become 'extreme'? And what is exactly the problem with that? The 'burgeoning urbanisation around cultural sites in Asia' and the 'race to capture tourism without proper preparation to receive them or the ever-expanding tourism infrastructure that erodes their setting' again are examples pointing out that heritage today is *extremely at risk*. In sum, none of the above examples indicate a paradigm shift. Even the 'growing acceptance of facsimile reconstructions as valid equivalents of originals long gone' is a questionable example to illustrate a paradigm shift. For sure, it does challenge the nature of authenticity to the extreme, but they are at the same time driven by the fetish of authenticity in the pursuit of constructing something as it might have been in the

8 See Global Heritage Fund (Ed.), *Saving Our Vanishing Heritage. Safeguarding Endangered Cultural Heritage Sites in the Developing World*, Palo Alto (CA) 2010.

9 Araoz, *Preserving Heritage Places*, 56, and all quotes following.

past. Therefore, if the list demonstrates something, then it is that the field of 'heritage' is extremely complex and diverse, that it consists of many different practices and approaches, and that in many places in the world heritage is at risk due to modern developments.

In the light of the above analysis it is far from obvious that 'everywhere the heritage community is increasingly finding that the professional toolkit and the doctrinal foundation on which it has relied for decades for an ethical practice are insufficient to effectively deal with these new demands which are often perceived as threats'. By 'the professional toolkit and the doctrinal foundation' the author is assumedly referring to the many conventions, charters and guidelines that have been developed by institutions such as ICOMOS or UNESCO. It is not explained why or in what sense this toolkit is insufficient to effectively deal with the new demands because, in fact, the examples given by Araoz prove that the reverse is the case. It is because of this toolkit that the analysis of the current state of heritage conservation presented by Araoz can be made in the first place. The conclusion is also very clear and unambiguous: heritage is at risk and, indeed, is facing many threats. For the current situation *not* to be experienced as a threat, surely, another paradigm is needed all together, but that has not been offered so far. It is not that because everybody is lying, that telling a lie is no longer morally apprehensive or that, therefore, the nature of what lies are has changed.

On Communities, Values and its Vessels

The gist of the argument in the rest of the paper boils down to the claim that, contrary to what has been thought until now, the core value of heritage does not rest in its material fabric, but in the 'vessels' of its immaterial value. Because this is what really defines heritage, and because values, according to the author, are in constant flux, heritage is in flux as well. Managing these changes is the new challenge for which a new heritage paradigm is needed. What forced these changes, is the recognition that heritage is part of community development and that, therefore, it responds 'directly and constantly to the evolving

needs of society at any given time'¹⁰, the assumption being that it can only do so if heritage itself is constantly changing and adapting too.

If we look at what it means for heritage to become part of community development, it turns out that, according to the author, heritage needs to be functional, if nothing else. To be that, the aesthetic and historic values should give way to the economic value of a 'heritage place' that then becomes a commodity in the real estate market.

'A building's economic and use values rest not so much on its fabric as on its ability to serve a desired purpose. By *overriding* the traditional historic and documentary values, which rested entirely on material form, these new values can be used in the socio-political arena to justify a complete interior gutting in order to make a historic building functional and competitive in the real estate market.'¹¹

To fully appreciate what is said here, one should be aware that the above citation is provided as an example illustrating the claim that 'the range of values that are now *attributed to heritage* includes many that in the past played no role in the conservation of material culture' and that 'the dispersal of values between material and intangible vessels increasingly comes at the expense of the historic fabric of the place'¹².

What makes this assumption very problematic is that the author treats the economic value of a monument *as if it were a heritage value in its own right*. Because it is treated as a heritage value in its own right, and because it is considered to be of greater importance, it supposedly overrides the more 'classical heritage values' attributed to a monument. Because of this, the author does not consider the question in what sense one can still speak of a 'historic building'. What is left is 'a building' with a market value that is determined by location and modern architecture which have nothing to do with heritage management. This, of course, does not exclude 'heritage places' of having a

10 Ibid., 58.

11 Ibid. (italics William Derde).

12 Ibid. (italics William Derde).

market value of their own. But this is a very trivial remark to make and it is also not what the author is pointing at.

On the Nature of Values

An important claim that is made again and again by Araoz is that it is obsolete to think that the value of a 'heritage place' rests exclusively in the material fabric of the monument or site. According to the author it is the repositioning of heritage as part of community development that has subsumed heritage into a process that is inherently dynamic. Hence, tangible aspects gave way to the intangible aspects, even in the West:

'[...] even in the western world, the values of traditional heritage no longer reside exclusively on its physical fabric and form, but on the intangible concepts that by their very nature are in constant flux.'¹³

In other words, it is the intangible aspect overriding the material fixedness that allow monuments to change and adapt. The problem, however, is that it is not explained if, how, and in what sense, these intangible aspects are also defining the monument as 'heritage'. Therefore, we will focus on the nature of 'values' as they are presented in the paper instead.

What is striking is that values are presented as being 'in constant flux'. This idea is used in two ways, one of which is problematic and confusing, the other which is trivial. In one sense this claim is used to illustrate that the *attribution* of values is not constant and changes according to time and place:

'It is commonly accepted now that the values attributed to a heritage place are not an immutable constant, but rather that they evolve in respect to time and space.'¹⁴

Indeed, this is quite an unproblematic claim which no one will deny: different communities can and do attribute different values to the same object, or, the same object can get different appreciations through time. What is problematic, however, is

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

that the constant flux of values is also interpreted in another sense which reflects on the *nature* of values themselves.

‘In the context of heritage, values are a vaguely shared set of intangible concepts that simply emerge from and exist in the ether of the communal public consciousness. Any attempt to institutionalize or freeze them permanently is in fact impossible in the long term, and were it possible, it would be tantamount to social engineering or even ideological propaganda of a single opinion at a moment in time.’¹⁵

Here it is said that values are impossible to freeze, that they do not have a permanent character and that they are very ‘ethereal’. In other words, they seem to have a fuzzy character and are difficult to pin down because they are constantly in flux. However, this is not how values operate in the world. Contrary to what is suggested here, values have a very permanent and stable character. If they would not have this stable character, we would not be able to recognise them, honour them, cherish them, or defend them. Honesty, magnanimity, generosity, hospitality, are but a few examples of values that we cherish in a person and that we nourish within our children. The right to freedom of speech, the right of free practice of religion are but a few examples of values that we cherish in a society. Defending these values when they are endangered by tyrannical or other forces has little to do with ‘social engineering’ or ‘ideological propaganda’. The same holds true with the ‘Outstanding Universal Values’ (OUV) that are attributed to monuments and sites on the *UNESCO World Heritage List*.¹⁶

Vessels at the Rescue

If values are difficult to fixate, and if, according to the author, ‘they can be neither protected nor preserved’¹⁷, what is it that the heritage community preserves? The answer is as quickly given as it is enigmatic:

¹⁵ Ibid., 58–59.

¹⁶ See Jokilehto, Jukka (Ed.), *The World Heritage List. What is OUV? Defining the Outstanding Universal Value of Cultural World Heritage Properties (Monuments and Sites 16)*, Berlin 2008.

¹⁷ Araoz, *Preserving Heritage Places*, 58.

‘What really is crucial for and at the very core of conservation is understanding *where* those values rest, for that is what we are called to conserve and protect. These are what I call the vessels of value and significance.’¹⁸

Up till now the heritage community has protected ‘the material vessels where values have been determined to reside’¹⁹. Under the new heritage paradigm what should be protected are the ‘intangible vessels’: the use, the message, but not a place. Whatever that may mean.

The Need for a Theory of Heritage

If the ‘Malta Paper’ gives us a snapshot of the current state of thinking about heritage and if the analysis is accurate, then we are far removed from a stage where dominant paradigms emerge. This, however, does not mean that there is no truth or value in what Gustavo Araoz is saying. Indeed, intangible aspects of heritage have been neglected in the traditional approach to heritage. It cannot be denied that heritage today is assessed from the perspective of its role in community building and society. And it is true that emphasising the protection of the authentic material fabric of a monument threatens to cut it off from being relevant and useful and, as a consequence, actually jeopardises its survival for the future.

The solution, however, does not lay in swinging the pendulum in the other direction and considering the traditional approaches as obsolete. What is needed is a thorough analysis of the current state of dealing with heritage. Actually, this is what the ‘Malta Paper’ also provides. What it shows is that heritage management and policy today is based on a myriad of *practices* and *practical solutions* more or less on an *ad hoc* basis. It also shows that the domain of heritage is *extremely complex*, that heritage seems *extremely at risk*, and that we are confronted with many pressing matters that threaten to override established practices. All of these need an appropriate answer. What the analysis also shows

¹⁸ Ibid., 59 (italics William Derde).

¹⁹ Ibid.

is that what is lacking, is a *theory of heritage* and that this theory is also not provided by the so-called paradigm shift towards the 'vessels' of intangible values. For that to be the case, it needs to be demonstrated *how and in what sense the intangible aspects, uses, and communal approaches to heritage, are also outlining what heritage is, how heritage is defining the uses and approaches, etc.* This is currently not the case. To sum up, what we see in the field of heritage today is what Thomas Kuhn describes as *a state before 'normal science'*.²⁰

UNESCO has always protected monuments, sites and landscapes and it has done so on the basis of their OUV. It has protected these monuments, sites and landscapes because of the values that are attached to them. The question then becomes: does a monument, site or landscape become heritage because of the values attached to them, whatever the nature of these values? Or does heritage exist regardless of the values that are attributed to them? If the latter is the case, and I believe that this is indeed so, then we need a theory that distinguishes heritage from everything else in the world.

It is also clear what kind of questions a theory of heritage should answer at the minimum. What is 'heritage'? How can it be distinguished from other things in the world? Bear in mind that definitions are of no use here. What we need are hypotheses which have consequences. What does 'heritage' do? Does it have a function that is unique to itself, or not? Are tangible and intangible 'heritage' different in kind or not? Is 'heritage' static or dynamic? If the latter, what kind of dynamics is structuring 'heritage'? If the former, how does it survive? How and in what sense does 'heritage' contribute to community building? Is 'heritage' a cultural universal or not?

I believe that it is by trying to answer these and similar questions that we will start gaining insight into the phenomenon of 'heritage'. This insight is currently lacking. Hence, the myriad of voices, solutions, suggestions and the heated debates the outcome of which will remain indecisive if no different and more fundamental questions are being asked.

20 See especially Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 10–22 (Chapter 2: The Route to Normal Science).