Editorial: heritage, sustainability and social justice

Diane Siebrandt, Anne-Laura Kraak, Luke James and Melathi Saldin
Introduction

This special issue of *Historic Environment* emerged from a symposium by and for emerging heritage researchers at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, Deakin University, Melbourne, in November 2016. The objective of the symposium was to explore the intersections between heritage, sustainability and social justice. In the realm of heritage conservation, conflict and its aftermath, the rapidly growing tourism industry, the need to accommodate human and cultural rights, and changing global institutional practices and standards are among factors that result in complex situations that challenge disciplinary and professional boundaries. The papers in this issue illustrate this complexity and explore ways in which the links between heritage, social justice and sustainability can present productive synergies. They cover cases in Iraq, Iran and Myanmar as well as aspects of the World Heritage programme of the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the broader international legal framework.

As the journal of the Australian chapter of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), *Historic Environment* has published widely on heritage theory and practice. Sustainability and social justice, however, are less obviously at home here. Because of their potential breadth and unfamiliarity, in this editorial we will briefly introduce these concepts and how they relate to heritage conservation.

Heritage and sustainability

From its origins associated with ‘sustainable development’, sustainability has become a broad framework that encompasses everything from population to profits. It is now 30 years since the World Commission on Environment and Development’s Brundtland Report formulated the widely accepted definition of sustainable development: ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (1987, p. 43). It has been noted that sustainability and heritage share conceptual similarities (Auclair & Fairclough 2015). Besides the essential mission of transmitting what is of value from the past and present to future custodians, the underlying principle of sustainability echoes a maxim of cultural heritage conservation—‘do as much as necessary and as little as possible’. Yet despite an energetic campaign from UNESCO, amongst others, to include a specific reference to culture or cultural heritage in one of the headlines of the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—which set out several goals that the international community aims to achieve by 2030—culture appears in only four of the 169 ‘targets’ and only one specifically refers to cultural heritage (Committee on Culture of the World Association of United Cities and Local Governments 2017).
Nevertheless, in the last decades, sustainability has increasingly been adopted in global heritage policies. In 1994, the *Operational Guidelines for the Implementation of the World Heritage Convention (Operational Guidelines)* first referred to the ‘sustainable use’ of cultural landscapes. In 2002, to mark the 30th anniversary of the *Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (World Heritage Convention)*, the World Heritage Committee adopted the *Budapest Declaration* in which it articulates its aim to ‘seek to ensure an appropriate and equitable balance between conservation, sustainability and development, so that World Heritage properties can be protected through appropriate activities contributing to the social and economic development and the quality of life of our communities’ (UNESCO 2002, p. 4). In the following years amendments to the *Operational Guidelines* started to include more references to sustainability.

Most recently in 2015, the World Heritage Committee adopted its ‘Policy for the integration of a sustainable development perspective into the processes of the World Heritage Convention’ (UNESCO 2015). This ensures policy coherence with the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and outlines how World Heritage can contribute to the three key dimensions of sustainable development: environmental sustainability, inclusive social development and inclusive economic development.

ICOMOS also aims to align its activities with those of the SDGs. The organisation has announced that ‘Sustainability’ will be the theme of its ‘2018 Scientific Programme’ and in 2017 adopted the ‘ICOMOS Action Plan: Cultural Heritage and Localizing the SDGs’ (Yildirim 2017). Contributors to this plan aim for ‘[t]he recognition, mainstreaming and effective contribution of cultural heritage as a driver and enabler of sustainable development in the process of implementing the United Nations Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goals’ (ibid, p. 4). The plan, which elaborates several ‘Action Areas’, is meant to be a ‘guiding roadmap for ICOMOS members, as well as other culture and heritage advocates, to follow toward achieving implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda at the national and particularly the sub-national (regional and urban) levels’ (ibid, p. 3).

It is clear that sustainability will remain a central topic in global heritage governance in the years to come. However, an evaluation of existing scholarly literature demonstrates that ideas about what this means in practice vary widely (e.g. Albert, Bandarin & Roders 2017; Barthel-Bouchier 2013; Labadi & Logan 2016). This is partly because many scholars—influenced by their disciplines—have emphasised one of the several different dimensions of sustainability: economic, environmental or social.

In *economic* terms, scholars explored how the remains of the past or cultural traditions can remain or become a sustainable source of income. For example, Guido Licciardi and Rana Amirtahmasebi (2012) edited a volume, published by the World Bank, in which several contributors discuss how investment in historic city cores may promote economic growth and reduce poverty. Economic sustainability in heritage conservation contexts often relates to tourism. Several academics have explored how heritage tourism can be the source of sustainable development (e.g. Girard & Nijkamp 2009; Nasser 2003).

Other scholars have been concerned with the potential of heritage conservation to contribute to *environmental* sustainability through reducing the energy associated with built forms, for example through harnessing the embedded energy through adaptive reuse, and improving the environmental performance of old buildings through passive heating and cooling, ingress of natural light, and retrofitting energy efficient power and water infrastructure (e.g. Boyd 2017; Yung & Chan 2012; Winter 2016a, 2016b).

Consistent with themes of resilience and adaptation—but focusing on the social and cultural dimensions—Elizabeth Auclair and Graham Fairclough (2015, p. 3) introduce their edited volume on heritage and sustainability by arguing that ‘heritage is a central thread of sustainability, not only as an issue of preservation but of creation, adaptation and resilience to change.’ Making the specific case for the contribution of heritage to the concept of *cultural* sustainability, they claim that culture should not be considered as yet another pillar of sustainable development,
but rather fundamental to its other pillars. Moreover, they regard the potential energy-saving contributions of historic buildings as ‘the least important aspect of the relationship of heritage to sustainability’, emphasising rather ‘the cultural and social contribution that heritage makes every day to how lives are lived, and to the ways in which identities and relationships are formed’ (Auclair & Fairclough 2015, p. 3).

Such themes are reflected in the article by Annelies Van de Ven (this issue) about the relationship between heritage and sustainability in Iran. She discusses the impact of changes in Iranian nationalism and identity politics on the cultural and social sustainability of three heritage sites, the Tomb of Cyrus the Great at Pasargadae, Sa‘dabad Palace and Azadi (formerly Shahyad) Tower. Although these pre-Islamic and Pahlavi sites can be considered hostile to the post-revolutionary Islamist discourse in Iran, a reinterpretation of their significance enabled their incorporation in the new nationalist narrative of Iran. In these cases, reinterpretation becomes a means to ensure the conservation—rather than destruction or neglect—of these sites in a new political context. Arguably, in these cases, reinterpretation is necessary for the sustainability of conservation.

The article by Lisa Rogers (this issue) straddles the environmental and social dimensions of sustainability. She explores the connection between intangible cultural heritage and environmental law and demonstrates that both categories of international law aim to contribute to sustainable development. However, she sees room for further integration of these two frameworks. In particular, she notes the increasing recognition of the contribution of intangible cultural heritage to sustainable development and argues for equal appreciation of how sustainable development principles may benefit the safeguarding of intangible cultural heritage.

Soren Kemp (this issue) discusses how culture and heritage may contribute to sustainable development in the context of Myanmar. He explores the cultural and symbolic processes through which power has operated in Myanmar under the former military regime and argues that both the co-option of heritage by the former leaders as well as popular resistance took place in a Theravada Buddhist ontological sphere. This sphere presents a distinct worldview within which competing visions are articulated of what sustainability and social justice should mean in Myanmar’s future.

Beyond questions of how heritage conservation may contribute to or be aligned with the aims of economic, environmental and social sustainability, a number of critical heritage scholars have questioned whether the practice of protecting remains of the past can ever be sustainable. They draw attention to the implications of the increasing ubiquity of heritage (Ashworth & Larkham 1994; Holtorf 2001, 2013; Edson 2004; Harrison 2013a, 2013b). Cornelius Holtorf (2001, p. 289) argues that ‘the trend is not that we will one day have no archaeological monuments left, but in the future more and more of our lifeworld will be recorded as some sort of historical (or natural) site worthy of preservation’. This not only creates significant challenges for the process of heritage management but compounds the arduous task of history writing itself (Tilley 1989). Similarly, Rodney Harrison (2013a, p. 591; 2013b, p. 3) has questioned whether a continual growth model for heritage—in particular, its lists and registers—is sustainable.

A key theme in all dimensions of and approaches to sustainability and heritage is intergenerational justice, or ‘whether we should care about the welfare of our successors, and what sacrifices we ought to be prepared to make now in their interests’ (Barry 1991, p. 234). Through its implicit concern with justice, sustainability thus draws us close to the second theme of this special issue: heritage and social justice.

**Heritage and social justice**

The complex concept of social justice—which is not merely concerned with justice for the individual, but with what is just for the social whole—has been debated for centuries. A distinction is usually made between distributive justice, which refers to the fair allocation of benefits and burdens; and retributive justice, which determines the appropriate responses to harm. However, the following questions—answered differently depending on the time, place, and actors involved—are subject to continuous contestation: What are these benefits and
burdens? Who should distribute them and how? Among whom should they be distributed? What is harm? What is a proportional response to a given harm? (see for example, Harvey 2009; Miller 1999; Rawls 2003; Sen 2009).

The question of how social justice is implicated in heritage conservation emerged in the late 1980s when ‘a shift in the heritage paradigm’ (Silverman 2011, p. 5) took place. Before this, heritage conservation was largely a technical, material-focused field. Experts, often civil servants, were tasked with advising on the protection of monuments and the disciplines of archaeology and architecture took an important role in the identification of appropriate buildings and sites to be protected. John Carman and Marie-Louise Stig Sørensen identify two main trends that contributed to the paradigm shift in the 1980s. First, the emergence of post-structuralism and post-modernity challenged knowledge claims and authority. Secondly, they argue that changing politics, including post-colonialism, ‘made it possible to recognise new voices and increased appreciation of alternative claims about the past, including challenging controls over access and representations’ (Carman & Sørensen 2009, p. 17). In the United States, Indigenous peoples’ claims for the return or ‘repatriation’ of human remains and cultural materials culminated in the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) in 1990. Debates about repatriation are about who owns and controls the past, but also importantly, ‘about the cultural politics of identity—who has the legitimacy and power to define who a particular group or community are and who they are not’ (Smith 2006, p. 35). These were some of the first struggles about social justice in heritage conservation.

Further developments in the field were driven by alternative claims about the past (see for example Byrne 1991; Layton 1989; Simpson 1996). These resulted in the addition of the category of cultural landscapes to the Operational Guidelines (Cleere 1995) and the emerging recognition of the relativity of authenticity (Wei & Aas 1989) which gained practical recognition via the influential Nara Document on Authenticity (ICOMOS 1994). The concept of heritage expanded from objects and buildings to include intangible forms of heritage (Ahmad 2006; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004; Prott 2001; Smith & Akagawa 2009) and the increased acknowledgment of the importance of community involvement emerged (Moser et al. 2002; Start 1999; Waterton & Watson 2010). Increasingly, scholars and practitioners acknowledge that cultural heritage is about power and politics, legitimacy and identity, property and ownership, dissonance and contestation, and economics and development. This reconceptualisation puts people, rather than materials, at the centre of cultural heritage practice and makes efforts to protect heritage more likely to face questions about how associated benefits and burdens are distributed, who makes decisions, and what the appropriate responses are to violations of law or ethical standards. In other words, heritage scholars and practitioners began exploring the relationship of heritage and social justice.

Accordingly, in the last decade there has been a significant increase in publications, projects, and policies that are concerned with ways in which heritage conservation activities can take place in a socially just manner (e.g. Johnston & Marwood, 2017; Silverman & Ruggles 2007; Little & Shackel 2007; Hodder 2010; Waterton & Smith 2010; Smith 2010; Sandell & Nightingale 2012).

Several legal scholars have focused on retributive justice, such as how the international legal framework may present solutions to conflicts and violations related to heritage (e.g. Blake 2015). In a notable recent development, the International Criminal Court charged Ahmad Al Faqi Al Mahdi for the war crime of intentionally attacking historic monuments and buildings in Timbuktu in Mali (e.g. Badar & Higgins 2017). The potential reconciliatory role of heritage for restorative justice—which stands for ‘not only acknowledging harms committed by persons, but also the desirability for the active participation—of victims and offenders in attempts to solve the conflict’ (Capeheart & Milovanovic 2007, p. 55) has also been explored (e.g. Simpson 2009; Durbach 2017; Jakubowski 2017; Nieves 2009). In her article, Rogers (this issue) briefly discusses how the World Intellectual Property Organisation is currently negotiating an international legal instrument that will stipulate how Traditional Knowledge may be restored to Indigenous and local communities through restorative justice measures.
Another group of scholars have been concerned with distributive justice: how the benefits and burdens of heritage conservation are distributed (e.g. profits from the tourism industry, forced relocations, implications of gentrification) and who decides (who are the people that are impacted and how are they involved). This is also related to the important emerging theme of the accountability of heritage practitioners and researchers. Robert Johnston and Kimberly Marwood (2017) argue that researchers need to reflect on how their work either sustains or contests existing social disparities, while Byrne conceived of heritage itself as a form of social action (Byrne 2008). To approach greater justice, the former argue for the use of an ‘action heritage’ framework, which focuses on process rather than outcome and ensures broader participation (Johnston & Marwood 2017).

The papers in this issue are particularly concerned with distributive justice. In his article, Luke James introduces a distinctive perspective on UNESCO’s World Heritage system. Through an analysis of what is presented on the World Heritage map, and particularly what is absent from it, he raises questions about who does and does not benefit from this system. In particular, he considers the implications of an instrument of global heritage governance that is dominated by the notion of the existence of coherent territorial nation-states. The push to become ‘fully universal’—in terms of ratification—disregards critical questions regarding the sustainability of the programme or how it relates to social justice.

Diane Siebrandt (this issue) examines the history of military usage of the archaeological site of Ur in Iraq. She argues that exclusion of local Iraqis from accessing and engaging with this heritage for decades has negative implications for social justice. In other words, the benefits of this heritage site have been poorly distributed. However, she points out that useful lessons can be learnt from the occupation of Ur. In particular, the successful cooperation with the local Iraqi site curator should serve as an example of how relationships with the larger community can be developed in the future.

Anne-Laura Kraak (this issue) has explored the potential of human rights-based approaches to lead to greater justice in the context of the World Heritage nomination of Bagan in Myanmar. She concludes that complexity and ambiguity about what social justice means at this heritage landscape creates limitations on what the universalist human rights framework can achieve. Nevertheless, it can provide certain useful insights, particularly when it comes to moving beyond a preoccupation with heritage fabric and history to consider those whose lives are entwined with heritage today.

**Heritage, sustainability and social justice: emerging areas of inquiry**

Following decades of conceptual and policy developments, it is now widely understood that heritage is about more than a set of techniques to preserve materials or a resource to be managed. As noted by Tim Winter:

> Recent years have seen heritage, and culture more broadly, form part of the discourses and agendas that constitute contemporary international and global governance. Whether it is sustainability and sustainable development, the fight against violent extremism, state global wealth, climate change, or policies around human mobility or citizenry, heritage has a much greater stake in these areas than it has ever had before ...

As geopolitical shifts occur in these different domains, the discourses and paradigms of heritage conservation will, by implication, also be altered. (Winter 2014, p. 321)

For the symposium in November 2016, we invited early career researchers to reflect on how their work relates to two areas of global concern in which heritage has a stake: sustainability and social justice. As a result of our disciplinary backgrounds in social sciences, the emphasis of the contributions is on social (rather than environmental or economic) sustainability and distributive (rather than retributive) justice. Still, the papers display widely different insights, ranging from how the reinterpretation of heritage sites in Iran can contribute to sustainability (Van de Ven) to how the international legal frameworks for the protection of intangible cultural heritage and the environment can reinforce each other (Rogers); from how a Theravada Buddhist ontology...
influences ideas about sustainability (Kemp) to what insights the World Heritage map provides on how the World Heritage programme relates to sustainability and social justice (James); and from the analysis the implications of the military occupation of the archaeological site Ur in Iraq (Siebrandt) to an investigation of the potential of human rights-based approaches to lead to greater justice in Bagan in Myanmar (Kraak).

Heritage, sustainability and social justice are broad concepts whose links present an emerging field of inquiry. The papers in this issue present contributions to such research by emerging scholars and as such present a taste of the direction in which such research will be heading in the future.

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