Sydney Opera House on eBay: enabling technologies, community and social value

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Abstract:

Digital forms of participation with significant places, such as the Sydney Opera House, are increasing. What can they reveal about communities of this World Heritage property? How do contingent forms of participation evidence the interconnectedness of tangible, intangible and digital forms of cultural heritage?

Critical heritage scholars assert that social value is a central issue in cultural heritage. In an Australian context, ‘social value’ is used to denote the significance that communities have for places of cultural heritage. For over two decades social value has been promoted by Australian heritage practitioners, yet it remains a critical and ongoing issue for the profession and academic discipline. Unlike other forms of place-significance such as scientific, historic or aesthetic values, the assessment of social value is complex and difficult to evidence. This theoretical paper explores participation in place through two digital instances, buying a real tile on eBay and a virtual one on Own Our House, a crowdfunding venture by the Sydney Opera House Trust. The paper seeks to reveal how such online artefacts demonstrate the way in which cultural significance is entangled in everyday individual experiences. It argues that these seemingly insignificant moments of participation are implicated in the personal and the emotional by connecting work within critical heritage studies with the work of media scholar Jose van Dijck. Then the paper reflects how these everyday forms of participation enabled by digital technologies disrupt and complicate established ideas about communities upon which local, state, national and international heritage systems are based.

Figure 1. Tile for auction on eBay apparently retained from the 1999 maintenance program (left) and home page from the Sydney Opera House Own Our House website (right). Reproduced with kind permission of Sydney Opera House Trust.
Introduction

What could buying a ‘roof tile’ on eBay tell us about the communities of a World Heritage property, such as the Sydney Opera House? Over the past few years there have been several such auctions on this website, selling ‘genuine’ spolia from Australia’s most iconic work of architecture. But this is not the only way tiles from this place can be purchased. As part of the building’s 40th birthday celebrations, the Sydney Opera House Trust launched the Own Our House project in December 2013 (Verhoeven 2013). This crowdfunding initiative harks back to the Opera House Lottery, the means by which the construction of the building was originally funded. Through the website, which is hosted by the Sydney Opera House, people can choose to purchase a virtual tile with a specific location on one of the buildings famous white shells. While selling the roof tile on eBay is self-initiated and the institution itself has instigated the sale of the virtual tiles, these two instances of participation serve as touchstones for exploring the way that digital technologies enable and extend social engagements with the communities of this place. In considering these fleeting forms of engagement the paper reveals how cultural significance is entangled within the everyday practices of individuals. It seeks to understand the implications of these digital instances of participation for the way communities are implicated within heritage inscription and for the way significance moves fluidly between tangible, intangible and digital forms of culture.

In 2007 the Sydney Opera House was inscribed on to the UNESCO World Heritage List. The inscription formally indicated that, at last after several previous attempts, Jørn Utzon’s iconic building had been recognised as being of outstanding universal significance. The remit of World Heritage advocates conservation on behalf of a global community, that is for ‘all of mankind’ (UNESCO 1972: preamble). Yet how such widespread global communities can be defined and engaged with is not well understood. As a result of the transformational shifts in internet communication technologies from a read-only to a read-write paradigm, digital engagements with the Sydney Opera House have proliferated over the last decade. Digital technologies offer an opportunity; while they enable brief forms of participation, such as buying a real or virtual tile, posting a photograph or pinning an image, recounting the building’s story on a personal blog or being part of a televised giant cake making-event, they are also transforming and enabling the existing practices of communities and audiences of World Heritage properties.

Digital Participation in Place

The implications and repercussions of people’s participation online through platforms such as eBay, Pinterest, Facebook, Flickr, Wikipedia, Twitter, and Instagram, to name a few, have been both lauded and critiqued. On one hand these social platforms are hailed as utopian and a means to democratisation (Tapscott & Williams 2006), while on the other they are derided as dystopian and responsible for the demise of knowledge (Keen 2007). However, such polemic reactions to historical shifts in communication systems are not unprecedented (Jenkins & Thorburn 2004: 1-2) and the reality that has emerged with time is not as extreme, and of course much more complex. As a consequence of the development of social media platforms, people’s participation with places such as the Sydney Opera House is no longer determined by geographical location. When someone ‘likes’ a photo of the building on Flickr, or ‘pins’ an image onto their board on Pinterest their geographic location is not prominent and perhaps reasonably, such instances could be considered small and apparently insignificant instances of engagement. Yet the prevalence of such activities is constantly increasing as our social interactions are extended and enabled by digital internet and communication technologies.

In 2013, Deloitte assessed the economic impact of the Sydney Opera House, and specifically the building’s digital footprint. This is one way in which online forms of participation with such places have been measured and determined to be of value. Deloitte estimated the building’s digital audience at a reach of 128 million people, predominantly via Facebook (Simes et al. 2013: 2). This is almost sixteen times the number of visitors to the Sydney Opera House building itself, estimated at 8.2 million (Sydney Opera House 2013: 3) and almost ninety times the 1.4 million people who attended a performance (Sydney Opera House 2013: 11) in the same year.
Arguments could be made about the significance of the engagements people have with the Sydney Opera House through social media platforms in relation to those of people who visit the building or attend performances. Nonetheless, Deloitte’s figures serve to reveal the way digital technologies are extending how people can interact with this place in new and contingent ways. These figures are not insubstantial and are sufficient to prompt consideration of how the communities and audiences of the Sydney Opera House intersect and merge online, how these might be defined, and importantly what this tells us about participation with the building and its broader social significance.

**Definitions of Communities**

Implicit in existing systems of heritage is a notion of communities as groups of people bound together by geographic co-location. Currently, the significance of sites is inscribed in relation to communities within their corresponding frameworks, lists and registers at a local, state, national or international level. National legislation and charters usually govern these levels, except for at an international level through the World Heritage program, which is governed by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) suite of charters and conventions. Yet, when these same sites are viewed through the lens of digitally enabled forms of participation, the idea of community is not so straightforward to define. While ‘communities’ is one of the convention’s five strategic objectives, where they are defined as “all non-State actors...in whichever form they manifest themselves” they mostly described in geographic terms; communities are local groups with a shared interest and ‘close proximity’ to the heritage property in question (UNESCO, 2007: 2). For World Heritage properties, such as the Sydney Opera House, where ostensibly communities are global, dynamic and dispersed understanding their values and shared interest is not so straightforward.

Communities are usually defined as a group of people bound together by some common thread (Lewi et al. 2010: 8). Most often this ‘common thread’ is understood in terms of geography, because culture and identity have until recently been closely tied to nation and place. However, the increasing frequency of global mobility, coupled with the rise of internet communication technologies has disrupted and redefined these ties. Communities may form in several ways: through their social interconnections with institutions; through their sense of belonging, personal ties or ‘communion’; or through propinquity, namely their sense of psychological proximity with each other (Bell & Newby 1976). In the case of the Sydney Opera House, well-known both locally and internationally as an icon for Sydney and Australia, the building provides a cultural touchstone through which such a psychological proximity is enabled. Several online groups whose activities are focused on the Sydney Opera House offer examples that illustrate the way the building is a means for people to come together. On Flickr there are groups that define themselves as exclusively collecting (or rejecting) photographs of the Sydney Opera House. In 2011, Planet Cake coordinated a group of volunteers in making a giant Sydney Opera House cake for Australia Day and in the months that followed Utzon’s death late in 2008 hundreds of personal tributes were posted to a tribute website in his name. (Jørn Utzon Tributes 2008-2013; Garduño Freeman 2010, 2013). Seen in this context the purchase of a physical roof tile from the Sydney Opera House on eBay or a virtual one on the Sydney Opera House Trust’s website can be understood as a form of participation of a larger kind, not simply a mundane instance of purchasing a souvenir. Such a perspective on community aligns with definitions proposed by sociologist John Urry (1995: 10) who argues that communities can also be understood as formed through an ‘ideology, where efforts are made to attach conceptions of communion to buildings, or areas, or estates, or cities and so on, in ways which conceal and help to perpetuate the non-communion relations actually to be found there’. ‘Community’, therefore can be a phenomenon of psychological closeness that arises from ideas and activities about places, regardless of whether these are geographically co-located or in-fact take place.

Importantly, the term ‘communities’ is often used to describe a groups of people with genuine connections and is contrasted with groups who simply have an association, such as an audience, which implies they have more superficial connections with each other (Lewi et al. 2010; Urry 1995). This is an important distinction because in an Australian heritage context, as well as more
generally, the concept of social value is used as a way of recognising community values (Beck 1995; Byrne, Brayshaw & Ireland 2003; Johnston 1992; Teague 2004; Walker 1998) while the concept of interpretation is used to describe the process of educating and communicating the inscribed values of a place to visiting audiences (Staiff 2013; Tilden 1977; Uzzell 2007/1998). In short, communities have strong connections to each other and the places that are significant to them while audiences are simply associated with each other and ‘consume’ the sites they visit. However, online where people both consume representations of the Sydney Opera House and participate by contributing their own images and artefacts on this place, how can communities be identified as distinct from audiences?

Reframing Audiences

The concept of participatory culture blurs the boundaries of communities and audiences. Coined by media scholar Henry Jenkins, ‘participatory culture’ describes the way audiences are not simply passive receivers of culture, but instead are active participants who draw on culture and appropriate it for their own uses (Jenkins 1988). Since the advent of Web 2.0 and digital technologies the term has become widely used to describe the participatory character of internet media and the more broadly ‘participation’ as a theme in a range of disciplines (Delwiche & Jacobs Henderson 2013). The groups described by Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture are less like audiences and more akin to communities.

Emerging investigations into digital forms of heritage have taken place alongside the shifting distinctions between communities and audiences brought about by new internet communication technologies. Examples from a museological perspective include the work of scholars Fiona Cameron, Sarah Kenderdine, Sarah Mangler, Yehuda Kalay, Tom Kvan and Janice Affleck (Cameron & Kenderdine 2007; Cameron & Mengler 2010, 2013; Kalay 2008) and more recently by Elise Giaccardi on the intersections of social media and heritage (Giaccardi 2012). However, digital forms of heritage and participatory culture around sites of heritage remain difficult to assess and inscribe because it challenges established definitions of communities and audiences that are directly tied to existing local, state, national and international heritage inscription frameworks. In an international context the UNESCO Charter on the Preservation of Digital Heritage (Digital Heritage Charter) broadly conceives of digital heritage as virtual replicas of tangible places of cultural significance or documents created digitally that should be preserved. Yet, neither the Digital Heritage Charter, nor the Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter, 2013 specifically recognises the social interactions that are enabled through digital technologies.

A compelling case for rethinking communities in relation to digital and virtual forms of heritage is made by Emma Waterton in her 2010 article, titled ‘The advent of digital technologies and the idea of community’. Waterton (2010: 6) begins by acknowledging that users of the internet and social media platforms are not representative of society, but argues that a hesitancy to recognise, or a quick dismissal of such interactions as inauthentic, overlooks the value of such forms of participation for heritage. Referencing Benedict Anderson’s (1991) concept of ‘imagined communities’, Waterton (2010: 6) argues for a non-traditional definition of community, one which is determined within ‘the minds of participants rather than the geographical spaces they occupy, and is defined by the subjective experiences and associations it engenders’. She suggests that communities can be ‘re-imagined as similar complexities of camaraderie and support forming in a new space, or place, where relationships are forged and new ways of being enacted and embodied’ rather than placing online communities in opposition to offline communities (Waterton 2010: 6). Waterton takes this up further in an article with Laurajane Smith where they note that there are many examples of communities that are not very ‘community-like’ and like all groups are subject to the social pressures of power, mediation and varying emotions. Waterton and Smith (2010: 8) argue that communities are not static social entities but rather are phenomena regularly ‘(re)constructed through on-going experiences, engagements and relations and not all of these need be consensual’. ‘Communities’ here is less distinguished from audiences and instead defined as a process through which a real or imagined psychological bond is enabled.
While online media sites may appear to engage communities and audiences in fleeting ways, they also offer individuals a way to publicly create a psychological bond with this place. Prior to the advent of participatory media sites, such as eBay, an old roof tile from the Sydney Opera House would likely have been kept as a memento within an individual’s existing social sphere. Perhaps, it might be displayed on a shelf or mantelpiece or stored safely in a cupboard, brought out as a curiosity for the right audience. Today its value is extended; it becomes a tradeable material commodity that can be publicly listed on the auction site eBay. This is also the case with the virtual tile on Own Our House. Once a tile is selected from the digitally modelled shells, a panoramic view can be explored giving a dizzying sense of perspective from the actual roof of the building one’s own personal view. The owner can write a personal message and post a personal photograph that is publicly available for all to see. The tile from eBay is both tangible and intangible. While the tile itself is material and supposedly the very fabric of the building, it is also a digital image that exists on a website. The tile from Own Our House is an entirely digital artefact, yet it connects this virtual form of ownership with experiences of the building that are unavailable to visitors on site.

If the idea of community is framed as a dynamic process, the purchase of a Sydney Opera House roof tile via eBay, or of a virtual one as part of the Trust’s fundraising scheme, can be seen as a way to be part of the community of this place. Whilst the material artefact, a ceramic roof tile, is essentially a piece of the building, its authenticity as spolia offers the purchaser an opportunity to touch the building and gain a sense of psychological proximity. The tile’s value is not its materiality, but rather the idea that it is connected with the building and that owning it makes this connection tangible. Similarly, the virtual tile is a more public display of a connection with this place. The ability to add a personal photograph and message and the co-location of these images on the chevron pattern of the tiles offers a way of displaying and in some way making tangible a connection and sense of participation with this place. In other words, while buying a tile is a personal form of participation, the impetus to do so relies on the sense of ‘communion’ inherent in such an act. What compels us to buy tiles, take photographs, make giant cakes or write personal tributes, is not the value of the tile, photograph, cake or tribute, but rather the imagined sense of participation in a larger community (or audience) that has a connection with this World Heritage place. These instances are part of larger cultural practices, not generated by digital technologies but rather enabled, extended and transformed by them.

**Enabling Technologies**

Cultural processes that take place through participatory media are theorised by José van Dijck in her book, *Mediated Memories in the Digital Age* (2007). Here, van Dijck explores how personal memory artefacts, such as photographs, souvenirs, videos and mementos operate culturally to mediate both collective and personal forms of identity, temporality and social practices. She does this by proposing a ‘conceptual tool’, that is, a framework or theoretical lens that seeks to articulate the complex cultural processes that such apparently ‘insignificant’ practices and artefacts support (Figure 2). Understood in this way, buying a memento or souvenir (such as a

*Figure 2. Jose van Dijck, (van Dijck 2007:50). Reproduced with kind permission of the author.*
tile), is one way to participate in place as these objects are used to remember and recollect experiences (Love & Kohn 2001; Love & Sheldon 1998; Olalquiaga 1999). Purchasing a tile on eBay or a virtual tile on the roof is a way of acquiring a memento that enables a certain form of connection with the Sydney Opera House. If the individual has been to the building it can act as a way of capturing memories from that experience. If the individual has not yet physically been to the Sydney Opera House it becomes projective, a connection mediated through many different forms of representations in which the Sydney Opera House exists in the minds of audiences (Garduño Freeman forthcoming).

Central to van Dijck’s analysis, is her conflation of analogue and digital counterparts as media technologies. Rather than positioning blogs against paper diaries, for example, van Dijck demonstrates how both are in fact enabling devices. Whilst paper and books are rarely thought of as a technology, van Dijck reminds us that all forms of media are technological inventions taken up in culture to support social practices. Instead of focusing on the way an analogue form of media might compete with the digital version, van Dijck’s conceptual tool draws out the continuities and transformations by connecting these artefacts to significant practices at a cultural level as well as emotionally significant instances at a personal level, thereby connecting national values with personal experiences. Acquiring souvenirs is a collective practice, yet their significance operates on an individual and personal level. Importantly, souvenirs also mediate time-like heritage sites, they offer access to the past in the present. The purchase of a souvenir is a projective act, where the material object itself is a metonym with which to make concrete the ephemeral experience of today. A souvenir tile enables the owner to reimagine the present day circumstances at some future date, regardless of whether it is a physical object purchased officially at the Sydney Opera House shop, like the official tile fragment, (Figure 3), spolia acquired via eBay or a virtual tile on a website which can be shared with others. Van Dijck’s conceptual tool also accounts for intangible forms of culture that are culturally embedded practices and relates these to individual embodied experiences. Here van Dijck acknowledges the way material and virtual artefacts are entangled with memorialising experiences through souvenirs, and the often ignored physical experiences of interacting with virtual objects via computers and environments that do not disappear whilst engaged online. My argument here is not to suggest that such minutiae are to be the focus of heritage conservation and inscription. Instead it is to suggest that the ambiguity and slippage encountered while attempting to understand the way digital technologies can provoke participation in place brings to light the interwoven relationship between physical and digital artefacts. It reveals how forms of culture that could be defined (loosely) as intangible heritage practices exist around an example of tangible heritage, in this case the Sydney Opera House.

Social Value and Community

Scholars within the field of Critical Heritage Studies consider social value as a central issue for contemporary definitions of cultural heritage. In The Uses of Heritage, Laurajane Smith (2006: 2) proposes that heritage is not a material artefact, but instead a cultural process where meaning is constructed. She argues that places become culturally significant because of the way in which we ascribe value to them.Provocatively, Smith proposes that the material and built fabric of heritage is not inherently significant, but rather that it becomes significant through what people do, associate, and the ways in which they assign meaning to such forms.
of culture. She states that such cultural processes determine what heritage is, what is not and the ascribed values. The position of critical heritage scholars, including Smith, makes a case for privileging heritage from the perspective of the present day and importantly, in relation to communities (Smith 2006; Munjeri 2004). This, in effect, restitutes the concept of social value at the centre of contemporary understandings of heritage.

Social value has been included as a form of place-significance in Australia’s best-known heritage practice instrument The Burra Charter: The Australia ICOMOS Charter for Places of Cultural Significance (Burra Charter), since its initial adoption in 1979. While it is regularly included in national listings, it has rarely been used as the sole criterion for inscription. (Canning & Spenneman 2001). Unlike other forms of cultural significance, I would argue that social value is embedded in society and therefore tends to reside in the ‘use[s], associations, meanings, records, related places and related objects’ (Australia ICOMOS 2013, Article 1.2). Social value is arguably more closely aligned with the concept of intangible heritage, which recognises the practices, representations, and expressions of communities and individuals as significant forms of heritage. Although Australia is yet to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage the articulation that places may have ‘intangible dimensions’ of places in the current version of the Burra Charter (Australia ICOMOS 2013: Article 1.1) alongside social values as a form of cultural significance acknowledges the way heritage is embodied within and across complex and diverse forms of culture.

In 2003, Denis Byrne, Helen Brayshaw and Tracy Ireland proposed that other forms of place-significance, aesthetic, historic and scientific, should be understood as values of society, and therefore subsidiary to social value. Community significance increasingly underscores emerging heritage concepts, such as ‘inspirational landscapes’ (Beazley 2004; Johnston et al. 2003) and to a certain extent within the World Heritage discourse, ‘cultural landscapes’. It is embedded within instruments such as the Nara Document on Authenticity adopted by ICOMOS in 1994, and more recently through the adoption of international instruments such as the Council of Europe Framework Convention on the Value of Cultural Heritage for Society (Council of Europe 2005). This emphasis on social value exemplifies larger shifts in the discipline and the practice of heritage towards the valuation of contemporary culture from fixed ideas of preservation and towards managing conservation alongside the recognition that the present is just as significant as the past.

Further, the growing emphasis on understanding heritage through a social lens is extending and moving towards incorporating the role of emotion and affect in heritage engagement. This shift is significant for the discussion here, because while the purchase of a physical or virtual tile is relatively unimportant at a national level, it is arguably significant at an individual and personal level. Understood through Jenkins’ concept of participatory culture and van Dijck’s model of mediated memories, such engagements are implicated in the broader appreciation and community of this place. Byrne argues that this privileging of the national over the local (or personal) is problematic because:

> [O]ur most intense relationships with the material past are situated at the level of the intimate, mundane and the local...[which] is mapped across the canvas of our individual life histories, bringing into focus a geo-historical frame that is smaller and ‘closer’ than that of the community let alone that of the nation. (Byrne 2013: 596)

Byrne (2013) proposes that the experience of heritage for many occurs through small individual engagements that are part of everyday life. This gives significance to many of the contingent forms of engagement with places, such as the Sydney Opera House, enabled through digital technologies. It situates these activates as contributions to the broader cultural processes enacted around this place. But the problematisation of heritage when viewed through the lens of digital technologies is not simply resolved by dissolving the separation of communities and audiences through the concept of participatory culture. The slippery, difficult to define characteristics of such instances as described here, also raise questions on what the object of study is. If heritage is to be defined and described through social values, and these are being assessed through contingent forms of engagement enabled by digital technologies, what
exactly should be inscribed and conserved? Is it only the building itself? Should it include the activities that occur in response to places, such as visiting the Sydney Opera House or attending performances there, which could, arguably, constitute forms of intangible heritage? Or is it the digital artefact through which many people engage? This is not to challenge or diminish the value of the exemplary conservation and heritage work that has been undertaken at the Sydney Opera House. Rather, the intention is to describe the way in which digital technologies connect forms of culture that are usually considered distinct types of heritage, governed by different legal instruments and definitions. Drawing on van Djick’s concept of mediated memories, the roof tile sold on eBay and the virtual tile offered on Own Our House, can both be understood as enabling technologies where tangible, intangible and digital forms of culture intersect. This opens up new perspectives on the way such activities and artefacts contribute to larger cultural processes through which we make meaning and construct and reinforce our sense of personal and collective identity and memory, mediate the past and future through the present and participate in embedded cultural practices through embodied experiences.

Conclusion

The central aim of heritage practice and law is to conserve and protect inherited forms of culture for future generations. Like the cultural artefacts described above, places of heritage significance mediate our communal sense of connection with each other and with the past and the future (Smith 2006: 29). Yet heritage is not usually defined, discussed or assessed at the intersections of intangible, tangible and digital forms of culture. At an international level, UNESCO’s suite of conventions and charters divide heritage into tangible, intangible and digital forms (UNESCO 1972, 2003a, 2003b). Conceptualised as engagements through enabling technologies, digital participation in place articulates the interconnections between tangible, intangible and digital heritage. Such participation works to support broader cultural processes which are implicated in identity, memory, practices, experience and sense of connection through time. Whilst selling a Sydney Opera House roof tile on eBay or buying a virtual tile on the Own Our House website might appear to be an insignificant form of participation with place, one that is contingent, ephemeral and perhaps only personally significant, it also serves to reveal the way in which such practices are complex and difficult to define, and therefore recognised as significant through the existing definitions of heritage. Further, as the importance of communities and their attachment to places is recognised, the implications of the blurred boundaries between communities versus audiences revealed by online forms of participation come to the fore. As online forms of engagement grow and become ubiquitous, heritage frameworks will need to adapt to account for more dynamic definitions of community and consider more fluid and connected inscriptions of heritage as networks, perhaps, rather than categorised as tangible sites, intangible practices and digital artefacts. Community should be interpreted as a sense of emotional connection to place. Heritage inscription needs to accommodate interconnected cultural meaning making processes that are enabled by digital technologies and through which emerging practices form.

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(Endnotes)

1 As at December 2015.