The role of cultural heritage in building peace and reconciliation: conflict, disaster and the future of heritage

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Abstract

The increase in natural disasters, conflict and unmanaged urbanisation in different parts of the world present diverse challenges to communities and their heritage. The selection of which aspects of heritage to remember and which of those to forget becomes complex in such contexts, resulting in heritage-making processes that often exacerbate differences between groups and communities. Despite these challenges, conservation, interpretation and adaptive reuse of heritage sites can also serve as the medium through which democracy, social justice, human and cultural rights can be upheld. Such intricate nuances of heritage-making present some of the most current challenges to the reconciliatory role of cultural heritage in an increasingly complex world. These concerns featured as recurring threads in many of the papers presented at the sessions on The Role of Cultural Heritage in Building Peace and Reconciliation (or Heritage for Peace), a subtheme of the Scientific Symposium on Heritage and Democracy, held in conjunction with the 19th ICOMOS General Assembly in New Delhi, India. This article reflects on the papers presented at these sessions and its relevance to the sphere of Australian heritage.

Introduction

The papers presented at the sessions on Heritage for Peace addressed diverse challenges for cultural heritage and associated communities, stemming from the complexities of unmanaged urbanisation, increasing natural disasters and the surge in armed conflicts. Many of the speakers in these sessions were from Europe, South Asia and Australia with a notable dearth of papers from Middle Eastern and African nations wherein the challenges to heritage from conflict and disaster are particularly rampant. The stories that emerged over the two days of sessions were difficult – they served as a grave reminder that while heritage could act as a platform to bring people and communities together, it also had considerable propensity to tear them apart. This was reflected in numerous examples of dissonance, conflict and contestation of heritage sites, landscapes and cultural expressions, which also often entailed the displacement of communities and their associated memories (Ferguson 2017; Taru & Gajare 2017). Alongside the conversations of loss, disconnection, grief and atrocities there were also conversations that spoke of the resilience of communities and their heritage in the face of social or environmental upheaval, giving us also a profound sense of hope about our shared humanity, heritage and the indomitable human spirit (Eaton et al. 2017; Mayer 2017 (and this volume); Williams 2017). Collectively, the papers presented represent some of the most current issues confronting heritage professionals and academics alike. This paper identifies three main themes emerging from the sessions on the role of heritage in building peace and reconciliation.
Heritage, memory and identity

The papers in these sessions reinforced the inextricable link between cultural heritage, memory and identity. Heritage in both its tangible and intangible forms is pivotal to our current understandings of collective memory and identity (Moore & Whelan 2007; Graham & Howard 2008; Isar, Viejo-Rose & Anheier 2011, p. 9). Monuments are an example of the physical manifestation of collective memories, deliberately chosen by communities or nations to represent themselves and their past (Isar, Viejo-Rose & Anheier 2011, p. 6). The process of selecting what heritage to remember and what to forget is integral to the formation of collective memories of groups and communities. Indeed, as Rodney Harrison notes ‘one cannot properly form memories and attach value to them without selecting some things to also forget’ (Harrison 2013, p. 167). The diverse approaches to the memorialisation of the past was reflected in the ways many presenters grappled with how difficult histories could or should be told. Some preferred to adopt the stance of a ‘dispassionate voice’ (Ferguson 2017) while others preferred to adopt an activist stance stating that ‘you should never compromise your right to cultural heritage’ (Billaci et al. 2017).

In her thought-provoking work on the erasure of the past, Bettina Arnold (2014, p. 2441) argues that this ‘selective winnowing’ of past events is also crucial for the construction of identities. What we memorialise however, is dependent on the ‘agendas of the living [which] invariably trump those of the dead and those in power decide whose past is preserved or enshrined and whose will be destroyed or denied expression’ (Arnold 2014, p. 2443). Thus, heritage and the memories associated with it, becomes a platform from which to differentiate identities, a way to cope with the ‘uncertainties about us and them’ (Isar, Viejo-Rose & Anheier 2011, p. 9). These uncertainties and how they are dealt with are especially critical in the formation of ‘national’ identities, notably in those nations recovering from colonisation, partition or conflict.

Identity politics and its entanglement with heritage was a key theme in many of the papers presented at this session. This was particularly evident in papers which examined heritage in post-Soviet era nation-states, wherein reconciling notions of present-day heritage with the communist past presented its own set of challenges (Eaton et al. 2017; Ferguson 2017). James Ferguson’s (2017) discussion of the treatment of Soviet heritage in present day Lithuania presented a grim outlook for the future of heritage in a post-communist context. The tensions between reconciling the communist past with that of a more modern vision for Lithuania ultimately resulted in the removal of Soviet-era sculptures from Vilnius’ famed Green Bridge. What could have been done differently in relation to the communist heritage at the Green Bridge? What lessons can be learned from the erasure of a crucial, although not necessarily favourable aspect of a nation’s past?

Other papers in this session showed us that alongside discussions of loss and destruction there were also those which focussed on our common humanity, shared heritage and resilience of the human spirit. The paper by Jonathan Eaton (and others), for example, examined the Spaç Prison in Albania – a former political prison and labour camp during the communist regime – and presented a more sustainable model for dealing with difficult memories and difficult heritage. Their work with the Heritage NGO, Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB-Albania), demonstrated how places associated with violent memories could be successfully developed into places of dialogue. However, they stressed that this could only be achieved if the entirety of the heritage-making process, including the practices of conservation, interpretation and adaptive reuse, are seen as vital components for the upholding of democratic values and human rights. Their approach to a dissonant heritage space such as the Spaç Prison helped reimagine it as a safe and communal space from which Albanians and former political prisoners could acknowledge and reconcile with traumatic memories of their communist past (Eaton et al. 2017). Similarly, Julia Mayer’s paper Connecting the past to the future: a vision for reconciliation in Anlong Veng, Cambodia illustrated how the construction of the Anlong Veng Peace Centre in the former Khmer Rouge stronghold created a space through which victims as well as ex-combatants could find better ways to remember a difficult past together in order to create a better future for post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia (Mayer 2017; this volume). Mayer argued that for reconciliation and healing to occur perpetrators of violence had to first be
seen as human by the survivors and their families. Also important to this process of healing was that ‘perpetrators’ and their descendants acknowledged the uncomfortable legacies of their past (Mayer 2017). The key message in these papers was the importance of reimagining sites and landscapes associated with traumatic memories as places of regeneration and hope. Heritage could be the key to creating spaces for engagement and interaction and help bring divided or traumatised communities together. Indeed, as Rohit Jigyasu and colleagues noted, ‘the symbolism inherent in heritage is … a powerful means to help victims recover from the psychological impact of disasters’ (Jigyasu et al. 2013, p. 22).

Heritage, recovery and reconciliation

The intricate links between heritage, memory and identity discussed above have oftentimes rendered heritage susceptible to the machinations of those seeking to target the identity and belonging of a group or community. Instances of targeted heritage destruction from diverse parts of the world include the destruction of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya (India) in 1992 (Bernbeck & Pollock 1996; Ratnagar 2004), the bombing of Sri Lanka’s Temple of the Tooth by Tamil Tiger rebels in 1998 (Coningham & Lever 1999; Wijesuriya 2005) as well as the extensive heritage destruction in Syria and Iraq carried out by ISIS in more recent years (Danti 2015; Harmanşah 2015). Many scholars argue that the physical damage or destruction, including the transmutation of heritage sites and landscapes, is central to the destruction of identity and memory (Viejo-Rose 2007; Arnold 2014; Bevan 2016). Such complex situations are compounded by entrenched heritage thinking, where heritage is constructed as a top-down process and often co-opted as a ‘discursive device’ to fulfil cultural or political agendas (Smith 2006, p. 87). A recurring debate has focused on the diverse ways that change could be brought to the deeply embedded ways of how we do, think and talk about heritage. This was especially critical for the move toward a more accountable and socially equitable heritage in post-conflict or post-disaster contexts. There were several examples of how heritage practitioners together with the communities they worked with, strove for this change.

Catherine Forbes’ (2017) paper on Community Activism in the post-disaster recovery of cultural icons in Christchurch and Kathmandu, argued that community activism was crucial to the recovery of heritage destroyed by natural disaster. Forbes demonstrated how the community of Maru, Kathmandu contested the state-led reconstruction efforts of Kasthamandap – a community building damaged by the 2015 Nepal earthquake. Community activism in this instance presented a powerful challenge to state reconstruction mechanisms, which sought to construct a new building in its place, disregarding the input of the local community to whom the heritage was most important. By fighting for their rights to be recognised as traditional custodians of this heritage building the Kasthamandap community successfully retained the ownership of the site, thus ensuring its continued role in community identity, belonging and self-esteem in the aftermath of natural disaster.

Another example of heritage initiative from below was provided by the paper presented by Lejla Hadžić (with others) on the role of Regional Restoration Camps (RRC) in restoring buildings destroyed by conflict in East Herzegovina (Bllaci et al. 2017). Their paper demonstrated how the restoration of community buildings such as mosques prompted the return of the community and also aided in the resurgence of traditional building craftsmanship. Most importantly, as bearers of the ‘post-war present’ this process of renewal helped present-day communities of East Herzegovina find a common ground through the medium of heritage preservation (Bllaci et al. 2017).

Similarly, Melathi Saldin’s paper on Heritage as resilience: the role of minority communities in post-war Sri Lanka demonstrated how everyday forms of heritage were being utilised by sections of Sri Lanka’s minority Muslim community to enhance understanding between diverse ethno-religious groups in the face of rising anti-Muslim violence with the end of the Sri Lankan civil war (Saldin 2017). She illustrated how the opening of mosques to members of other communities, the sharing of traditional food and other everyday cultural practices through initiatives such as the Welcome to Our Mosque program of the Centre for Islamic studies (a civil society organisation), helped foster engagement and collaboration between
Muslim and other ethno-religious communities. She argued that despite the lacklustre state infrastructure provided by the Sri Lankan government for post-war justice and reconciliation, the relatively small but powerful heritage centred alternatives for change offered by grassroots and civil society initiatives were critical in engendering tolerance and understanding among Sri Lanka’s diverse ethnoreligious groups (Saldin 2017). Certainly, the way forward underlying this and many other stories was the need for a space for dialog and understanding. In the words of the session co-chair Moulshri Joshi this could be as simple as those engagements which occur ‘across the table, around a blackboard, working together with our hands and talking’ (Joshi 2017).

The future of heritage

These discussions also raise questions about different visions for the future of our heritage. What role should global heritage organisations such as UNESCO, ICOMOS or ICOM play in the formulation of protocols for the protection of the democratic values of heritage? Indeed, one form of international justice has been seen in the successful prosecution and sentencing of Ahmad al-Faqi al-Mahdi by the International Criminal Court (ICC) in 2016 (Maclean 2016; Simons 2016) for his role in ordering the destruction of Timbuktu’s World Heritage listed 14th-16th century mausoleums. Formulated in the wake of World War II, the 1954 Hague Convention for the Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict (UNESCO 2010), unlike other UNESCO conventions relating to heritage, falls under the body of International Humanitarian Law. It seeks to protect cultural heritage from both unintentional and targeted destruction, recognising that the latter is often an attack on cultural identity and a precursor to cultural genocide. To date, however, no successful prosecutions have been made under the terms of this convention. The question therefore remains, will action be taken in relation to other horrific examples of cultural genocide occurring in other parts of the world, such as those taking place in active war zones in Syria and Iraq, or the assimilation processes that are leading to the erosion of cultures unique to ethnic minority groups such as the Tibetans or Uyghurs in China (Sautman 2000; Silverman & Blumenfield 2013; Skinner 2016). Equally devastating to the survival of heritage are processes of development. Indeed, as Ian Lilley (2016) observes ‘the destruction of heritage in the course of “everyday” development...does vastly more damage than war’. This is evident in Australia, where increased commodification of land by the mining industry in particular has resulted in the destruction of heritage sites at Murujuga (Burrup Peninsula), amongst the world’s oldest and largest collections of rock art (González Zarandona 2011).

Critical to these discussions is the position adopted by heritage professionals in the post-disaster and post-conflict heritage recovery process, particularly in their formulation of the ways in which sites should be managed and most importantly on the stories that should be told and how these should be told. Indeed, as the interlocutors or stewards of heritage, what role should heritage professionals and academics play in the realisation of a democratic and socially equitable heritage in the aftermath of social or environmental upheaval? What happens when the values of our profession are compromised by those from within to achieve narrow political and other gains? Indeed, there are countless examples of how the work of heritage professionals and academics, including architects, archaeologists, historians and others have been unwittingly or unintentionally co-opted to disenfranchise or inflict violence upon indigenous, minority or other disadvantaged groups. A good example is the work of German archaeologist Gustaf Kossina who is largely credited as having laid the foundation for an ethnocentric German archaeology (Arnold 1990; Emberling 1997; Halle 2005). Similar examples can be seen in India, where popularisation of the belief that there was a Rama temple beneath the Babri Mosque (Ayodhya) by sections of the archaeological community contributed to the devastation of the mosque (Bernbeck & Pollock 1996; Ratnagar 2004).

As an antithesis to these discussions of preserving the ever-increasing categories of heritage were also debates around notions of what to do with ‘unwanted’ heritage. Such discussions are particularly important given the expansion of the concept of heritage and associated memory boom in recent decades (Isar, Viejo-Rose & Anheier 2011, p. 3; Harrison 2013, p. 1). Scholars such as Cornelius Holtorf argue that the real danger for our future is not
the scarcity of heritage but rather that ‘more and more of our lifeworld will be recorded as some sort of historical (or natural) site worthy of preservation’ (Holtorf 2001, p. 289). Other scholars such as Harrison (2013, p. 166) contend that the uncontrolled listing of heritage has seen us increasingly hurtle towards a ‘crisis of accumulation’ where we run the risk of being ‘overwhelmed by memory … making all heritage worthless’ (Harrison 2013, p. 167). Another future challenge for those engaged in the heritage field therefore would be finding diverse ways through which heritage can be delisted, or deaccessioned from museums and galleries, or even perhaps as Harrison advocates, find ways to allow it to ‘fall to ruin without any active intervention’ (Harrison 2013, p. 166).

Conclusions

Indeed, many of the stories and conversations from various parts of the world will continue to challenge us, often engendering questions regarding the role of heritage amid rising global complexities. These also bring home questions of Australia’s role in the face of global heritage entanglements and shifts in the international heritage discourse. Australia continues to grapple with its own particular set of heritage challenges, notably those emerging from an increasing disconnect between the preservation of heritage (both indigenous and non-indigenous) and the ideals of development. As a nation, we continue to negotiate complex issues stemming from a difficult past, especially in relation to our Aboriginal, colonial and convict heritage, the traumas of which we have often covered up and tried to forget. Moreover, with its long and diverse history of immigration, Australia also has a stake in the heritage challenges of its migrant and refugee communities – especially those communities that have witnessed prolonged forms of cultural genocide and other means of heritage-centric violence. These events will inevitably inform the sphere of Australian heritage, particularly the ways in which heritage is defined, managed and preserved in years to come. Australia has an increasing role to play in formulating productive ways through which heritage can be used to heal post-disaster or post-conflict trauma and in a broader context work towards the democratisation of heritage at the global scale. Undoubtedly for us, and for many other participants, these sessions served as an important catalyst for thinking through innovative and sustainable ways through which we may engage with the present as well as the future of our heritage and more importantly provides a stark reminder that peace will remain a ‘long road if we don’t walk together’ (Chhang 2014).

References


Joshi, M 2017, Report by the National Co-Chair presented at the 19th ICOMOS General Assembly on 15 December 2017 – Session on the Role of Cultural Heritage for Building Peace and Reconciliation, New Delhi.


**Endnote**

1 The Regional Restoration Camps (RRC) is a conservation initiative of Cultural Heritage without Borders (CHwB-Albania). The RRC currently operates in the West Balkan region and aims to restore buildings as well as relationships damaged by war (Cultural Heritage without Borders – Albania, 2017).