

What is heritage?

“To neglect heritage is a cardinal sin, to invoke it a national duty”

(Lowenthal 1998)

How do you define heritage? Within this article I will attempt to explore heritage as a concept and try to explain how the web has influenced our view of heritage.

A complete definition of heritage is difficult enough to determine in the physical world without embarking on a journey into the digital world. To discuss both is practically impossible within such a short article, as the permutations of heritage on the web are practically limitless.

Heritage is often confused with history. Before defining heritage, we should explain the difference between history and heritage. David Lowenthal, Emeritus Professor at UCL and author of “The Past is a Foreign Country” and “The Heritage Crusade”, is an advocate of “underscoring distinctions between aims proper to heritage and those proper to history” (1998).

Heritage is often portrayed as the black sheep; as the seedy side to celebrating the past; as bad history, but the two are different. Heritage makes use of historical study and brings it to life. Heritage does not make investigations into the past, but commemorates it. Heritage is not a quest for

facts and analysis to find the truth, but as a reliving of the past to prove social capital to the current generation. As Lowenthal (1998) more aptly puts it:

"History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time; heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes."

The different elements of the past, history and heritage are faithful companions and cannot be completely separated.

The first place for a definition should clearly be a dictionary, but even here there is no consistency. The **Compact Oxford English Dictionary** focuses on the tangible elements of heritage, and specifies property and buildings that are historically interesting, but also includes that which is worthy of preservation. The **Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary** meanwhile, gives a more rounded definition by defining heritage as:

"Features belonging to the culture of a particular society, such as traditions, languages or buildings, which still exist from the past and which have a historical importance."

Already we have two different definitions, one concentrating on the tangible elements of heritage, and one including the intangible. Asking 'what is heritage' only raises more questions, which cannot be defined with any certainty. Fundamentally, heritage is both material and abstract. Heritage has a huge amount of duality – tangible/intangible, high/low, local/global,

remembered/forgotten. It cannot have a singular meaning; heritage has to be flexible in relation to the ideologies it encompasses.

The 1972 Convention for World Heritage from the United Nation Education Scientific and Cultural Organisation (**UNESCO**) describes cultural and national heritage, they do refer to intangible heritage. Whilst this could be related to physical heritage, this is could also be related to digital heritage. A line on their webpage - "*Cultural heritage is not limited to material manifestations*" – could expressly be referencing the new discipline of digital heritage.

Robert Shannan Peckham, a Fellow at St Peter's College, Oxford, in his introduction to "Rethinking Heritage", states that there are two related sets of meanings ascribed to heritage. The first is the association of heritage with tourism and with historically interesting sites that have been preserved for the nation. Objects, monuments and landscapes are celebrated, managed and maintained in order to reflect the past of a nation. His second meaning related to value heritage, including collective memory, customs and experiences as concepts that are construed as a 'birthright', therefore core to the relevant community. (2003).

Communities can be nuclear or disparate, physical and digital. To use Facebook as an example of a community: it is a social networking site, with large, small, specialist and general communities, all sharing information and

developing a history specific to them. It may not be perceived as high heritage, but it is a shared experience.

High heritage includes objects and values that provide a view on the past that is cloaked in exclusivity, providing a version dictated by the elite ruling classes. Low heritage relates more to the emergent, to the popular or common, therefore more aligned to the experience of the majority of the general populace. Both are equally valid, both are equally worth protecting, preserving and celebrating, but do those with the power and the money decide the 'real' heritage?

Heritage is also based around forgetting and remembering. We cannot possibly remember everyone's entire heritage. There has to be an element of loss and exclusion of our heritage; not only exclusion of events but also exclusion of people. Those that are designating and formulating the perception of heritage can also be excluding dissenting voices and conflicting views.

Peter Bagge, Associate Professor at Aarhus University, asks whether heritage should tell the truth about the past – good and bad – or whether it should only promote a “picture-postcard” version of the past (Peckham 2003). Should only the good and aesthetically pleasing be retained for future generations, or does the sad and ugly also deserve to be preserved to demonstrate the diversity of a cultures heritage?

The argument against a homogenised and sanitised heritage is vital. There is a risk of transforming the past through “the rose-tinted lens of nostalgia” and heritage becoming “the spoils of war”, the victor deciding what the vanquished will celebrate as the official past (Peckham 2003).

It is these differing views that the web can provide freedom for. The web allows the individual voice to be heard as loud, if not louder, as a corporate or political voice. The capability for a single person to develop a website cheaply and quickly means they can publish information about their perceived heritage. Other interested parties from all corners of the globe can view and participate in. This means that disenfranchised communities, whose heritage may be as odds with the ‘official’ view, can share their experiences with like-minded people.

The search for heritage underlines the endless search for identity. We are all looking for the perception of ourselves as part of nature and the universe (Peckham 2003). As the world becomes smaller and globalisation continues, our place in the world becomes more insignificant and so demonstrating our past, our heritage and its complexity provides us with the perception that we add value and are important. As the world moves on, the face of heritage changes.

The dawn of the digital age brings with it new elements of our existence that are being debated on their validity as being part of our heritage. The history of the entertainment industry is being archived providing both a technological

heritage and a record of our leisure pursuits. The internet is providing a challenge for fashioners of heritage. As corporations and individuals make more use of the internet for communication, creation and recording, the capacity for knowledge is being expanded and changed so fast on this medium perceived as being transient. Facebook replaces journals; Flickr replaces photo albums. Technology and fashions change so fast the heritage industry is struggling to keep up, not even considering the storage capabilities needed to retain this digital heritage. But heritage it is. The current generation eschews the physical for the digital but it is their heritage that they are creating, which will need to be protected and celebrated (or ridiculed) by future generations.

The web not only allows us as individuals to have a voice. It provides a channel for official communications to be distributed to a far wider audience than traditionally available, allowing those outside the location to experience their own heritage, and that of other communities. Museums, archives, galleries and other repositories of heritage can use the web to promote their collections, far beyond the limits of their physical space. Virtual museums like the Smithsonian Latino Museum, describes itself as:

“an avatar-based 3D virtual learning environment whose unique navigational features provide access to the vast and rich collections, research and scholarship, exhibitions and educational activities of the Smithsonian Institution as they relate to U.S. Latinos and Latin America.”

Archives, such as those provided by Ancestry.com, enable users to become involved in their own heritage. Providing electronic versions of historical records is only one part, there is a large amount of community-created content as users can transcribe, translate and edit existing records to provide an accurate documentation of the past.

Heritage is what makes us who we are. We all have our own individual heritage, as well as a communal heritage, regardless of what community we align ourselves with and we define our heritage depending on our needs. Heritage is also defined depending on the political, social, moral and technological state of the world and can be flexible depending on the needs of the community. A single, simple definition is impossible, but however we choose to interpret it, heritage is vital to understand our past and to define our identity.

Heritage must be all-inclusive. It has to involve high and low culture, tangible and intangible, local and global. Is this an idealistic view? We are not a united people, so our heritage cannot be unified. History tells us of conflict between peoples and ideals, so there must be a conflict in the definition and presentation of our heritage. Until there is a single, global, universal, egalitarian entity with the authority to define, celebrate, maintain and manage cultural heritage (which I hope there never is), heritage will remain a hotly debated, ever changing, ever growing concept.

The web provides us with a starting point for an egalitarian heritage. It allows all the citizens of the world to come together to discuss and disseminate their heritage and what their past means to them. It is unregulated and uncensored, but nevertheless, it provides a window on the inclusive nature of heritage.

References:

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