

From values to narrative: a new foundation for the conservation of historic buildings

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Since its inception, modern conservation has derived the significance of a heritage asset from the identification and prioritisation of distinct classes of values. Different systems of values have been proposed, and the focus of the debate has been on the competing merits of such systems, with little attention paid to the genealogy of their theoretical foundation. If such values-based systems were ever appropriate, they are increasingly out of step with other areas of cultural life, and the resulting tensions are particularly manifested when considering change to historic buildings and environments. The currently under-theorised state of conservation is positively harmful both to the conservation professions and to the buildings we seek to protect. It is increasingly urgent therefore that we understand conservation's philosophical origins, that we question the application of a late-nineteenth-century modernist approach to culture, and that we seek a better theoretical foundation.

Keywords: values; historic buildings; conservation principles; hermeneutics; Martin Heidegger

Introduction

Current methodology in the conservation of historic buildings focuses on values – their identification, description and prioritisation – with the significance of an asset derived as a product of these discrete values. Riegl articulated such a system of values in *Der moderne Denkmalkultus* of 1903 (1996), acknowledged as ‘the first coherent basis for modern conservation theory’ (Jokilehto 1999, 215). While it is true that not all conservation practice bases itself on an explicit system of values – for example in notions of local distinctiveness – a values system nevertheless remains the ‘authorised’ and dominant (indeed perhaps the only coherent) theoretical model. For example, the Getty Conservation Institute, in its three publications on values and the economics of cultural heritage (1999, 2000, 2002), regards a values-based system as axiomatic:

Conservation decisions – whether they are concerned with giving a building ‘heritage’ status, deciding which building to invest in, planning for the future of a historic site, or applying a treatment to a monument – use an articulation of heritage values (often called ‘cultural significance’) as a reference point. Assessment of the values attributed

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to heritage is a very important activity in any conservation effort, since values strongly shape the decisions that are made ... [V]alues are widely understood to be critical to understanding and planning for heritage conservation ... (Mason 2002, 5)

A variety of schemes of values has been proposed since Riegl (see, e.g. Mason 2002, 8–13), but these have displayed a remarkable unanimity of form and content, across both time and geography. The Getty Conservation Institute publications go to great lengths to tease out the methodological implications of bringing together disparate classes of values into a single system, but what appears lacking in the literature is an exploration of the philosophical background to this introduction of the idea of values into art history, and thence into conservation, or therefore any comprehensive critique of the theory underpinning conservation methodology. This is a major omission. How can those of us in the conservation professions possibly know who we are or where we might be going, if we do not know where we have come from?

While conservation practice might on occasion maintain a ‘pure’ theoretical approach, more often the reality is much messier, not least because conservation practitioners are often working reactively in response to a perceived threat to a heritage asset. Alongside the ‘pure’ approach, we can distinguish at least two other approaches, each still employing a values framework, but in different ways. First, there is conservation as conventionally understood within the broader culture, loosely as preservation (in the non-US sense), as the resistance, where at all possible, to change. Here, the urge is to keep things the same, and the values system is used as a scaffold, a barricade even, on which to erect whatever arguments are necessary to resist that change. A second approach is that consideration of values is simply delayed – here, the tendency is to postpone commitment to specific values until it is clear which way the professional wishes to argue, and then use them to adorn one’s conclusions, perhaps in a Statement of Significance. In neither case does the theoretical foundation serve its proper function, but instead is deployed ‘politically’ after the fact, as a form of postrationalisation. This clearly is far from ideal, and is indicative of the disconnect between theory and practice; I believe it is also symptomatic of a crisis in the underlying system.

It is tempting to set aside concerns with theory and to take the values-based methodology for granted. It is after all the familiar and broadly shared basis of much conservation practice. For more than a century, we have been investing in its refinement – why on earth would we want to question it now? By this argument, values present themselves as a neutral framework at our disposal, a benign tool on which to build consensus. My counter-argument is that by understanding their theoretical foundation, we will see that values are anything but neutral, let alone benign. Rather, they are implicated in a quasi-scientific classificatory system which, a priori, renders the material world static. It is for this reason that they deal so poorly with change, despite efforts to bolt more ‘vital’ categories such as social value onto the inherited framework. This has huge implications for conservation, which has (in my view helpfully) come to be defined as the management of change, for example in English Heritage’s (2008) *Conservation principles, policies and guidance*. We therefore have a healthy ambition, and an underlying orthodox methodology, in profound conflict.

This sense of crisis is echoed by Glendinning (2013, 450), who suggests that a post-war golden era for conservation has been superseded by ‘the present period of apparent disorientation’. He quotes from the German research project *Denkmal-Werte-Dialog* that since 1989 conservation values have been:

thrown into doubt at both a theoretical and practical level. Seemingly secure professional foundations have lost their general acceptance, the power of heritage authorities has vanished, and cultural heritage has come into head-on collision with commercialism – and all this without any coherent and practical new value systems in prospect, that could give any up-to-date definition to the place of heritage within globalised society. (Cited in Glendinning 2013, 418)

My contention is that a proper understanding of the history of values in philosophy would dispel the forlorn hope that a new value system will somehow ride to our rescue, and instead enable us to concentrate our efforts to more positive ends.

Yet, for all its familiarity, a values-based approach is only one possible reading of significance, and while it may have fitted well within the Enlightenment world from which it was born, it can perhaps no longer claim such a place of supremacy in these more contested times. If we are to take seriously the responsibility to manage change in the historic environment, then at the very least we should examine the roots of this idea to critique its foundational status, and to determine whether an alternative basis might not be more appropriate.

Context

Values were a central concern of philosophy in the German-speaking world from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, before which the use of the term seems to have been restricted to the field of economics.¹ Value theory began when Hermann Lotze, one of the principal precursors of neo-Kantianism, co-opted the term for philosophy in his *Metaphysik* of 1841 (1887), identifying moral and aesthetic values – ‘the good’ and ‘the beautiful’. The ground that made this co-option necessary was the predominant scientific view that reduced the natural world to one of mere factuality – ‘reality’ defined and limited to that which is measurable. Within this Enlightenment context, the question then arose as to how anything could be meaningful – clearly meaning could not be inherent within matter as so-defined. Hence, values were co-opted to address this question of meaning, as it were being ‘overlaid’ onto physical things, attached to the material world as ‘objectively valid but non-existent properties’, to put it in Kantian terms. Value theory was then developed by successive generations: Wilhelm Windelband was a student of Lotze, adding truth as a value, followed by Heinrich Rickert, in turn a student of Windelband. Bruno Bauch, a student of Rickert, provided perhaps the last exposition of objective value theory in his *Wahrheit, Wert und Wirklichkeit* of 1923, leading to its subsequent mobilisation in the service of National Socialism.

Parallel to this was an altogether different development in value theory in the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche. In *Beyond Good and Evil* and his posthumous notes published as *The Will to Power* (with the originally intended subtitle of ‘An attempt at a revaluation of all values’), Nietzsche (1966, 1967) attacked this Lotzean position, suggesting that a system of supposedly objective values in practice devalues the world. Nietzsche saw values as human creations, and humanity’s task being to create new values, thus radically modifying, but not rejecting, a values framework. Whichever of these positions one took, values thus formed the indispensable context in the late-nineteenth-century German-speaking intellectual world in which Alois Riegl lived, worked, and developed his ideas. It is well known that Riegl was a prominent art historian in Vienna from the late-nineteenth-century until

his early death in 1905; it should also be remembered that he began his academic career studying history and philosophy.

Mapping this philosophical context onto conservation theory, *The Venice Charter* of 1964 stands firmly in the Lotzean school, with its reference to ‘historical, archaeological or aesthetic value’ (article 11). Much has been made of *The Nara Document* (ICOMOS 1994) as a move-away from *Venice* and a rebalancing of conservation to include non-western perspectives. Compared to the classical linear structures familiar in the West, the cyclical structure of time in Eastern philosophies is presented as a key departure, with the disassembly and rebuilding of Japanese temples such as Ise upheld as the key example. However, Falser (2010, 128) provides a valuable insight into the Nara conference and the preceding Bergen workshop, noting that while the Japanese delegates constantly stressed that Ise was not representative, being an exceptional case, ‘they voluntarily followed the European trend by self-stereotyping the traditional, ‘cyclical culture’ of Japan and Asia’. One suspects that this approach found favour because of its usefulness in criticising a western paradigm of authenticity at a time when this was in question. Indeed, Falser concludes that:

The *Nara Document* marked an important paradigmatic turn that corrected the elitist search of an all-uniting authenticity concept and instead moved towards a global respect for cultural diversity with increased flexibility for regional interpretations of authenticity. (Falser 2010, 130)

Where *The Burra Charter* (Australia ICOMOS 1999) was first intended for a local audience, *The Nara Document* can be seen as the substitution of pluralism for the universalism of *The Venice Charter*, marking a shift from a classical/Lotzean use of values to a postmodern one. This shift has continued to develop, for example in Smith’s (2006, 299) critique of the ‘authorised heritage discourse’, which:

takes its cue from the grand narratives of Western national and elite class experiences, and reinforces ideas of innate cultural value tied to time depth, monumentality, expert knowledge and aesthetics.

Falser eloquently describes a new understanding emerging from *Nara*:

... a monument as historic object of collective memory can be described as a multi-optional container of a constantly growing stratigraphy of time, material and pluralistic remembrances (these can vary). Out of this container of layered memory, every generation can have its own access to always actual messages ... without modifying the ‘full richness’ of the monument for future generations. (Falser 2010, 129)

This rudimentary examination of the roots of value theory enables us to characterise the current debate within conservation as between ‘Lotzean’ traditional theory, and a postmodern ‘reevaluation of all values’ seen in the broadening of heritage, highlighted by *The Nara Document*, into the intangible and socially constructed. Being thoroughly ‘modern’ in both outlook and underlying philosophy, orthodox conservation practice has traditionally seen meaning as *intrinsic* to the material fabric in question, and thus remained resolutely focused on questions of authenticity, largely ignoring discussion of theoretical issues; such an approach is all too often encountered amongst, for example, Local Authority conservation officers and many

of the amenity societies in the UK (with the laudable exception of the Twentieth Century Society). Recent years have seen more openness to the second, 'Nietzschean' option, with the Getty Institute seeking to 'have its cake and eat it': 'Recognising the fundamental contingency of heritage values does not preclude the possibility of some values that are universally held (or nearly so)' (Mason 2002, 8).

Unsurprisingly, this 'postmodern' shift is contested, its implication being a choice between everything having value (because someone can always be found who 'places' value on it), and nothing having value because there can be no agreed frame of reference. Either way, there is no means of articulating and debating meaningful differences, which reflects the broader concern in the humanities and social sciences that postmodernism leads inevitably to a meaningless relativism. As Moore (1995, 53) put it, 'Postmodernism's commitment to anti-empiricism constructs a strange kind of marketplace where everything has equal value and everything is equally valueless'.

For postmodernism, having subverted all external authority, the only arbitration can be democratic, with the fear being that this will devolve into a sort of 'heritage X-Factor'. Consensus, of course, is no guarantee of a good outcome. Since it is human nature to be mistrustful of change, mere consensus in a conservative generation is likely to produce a sclerosis of the historic environment with change, where needed, becoming impossible. Such an outcome is just as damaging as an entrepreneurial generation's consensual abuse of heritage, such as at the hands of the nineteenth-century restorers, which was of course the impetus behind the birth of modern conservation with the *SPAB Manifesto* (Morris 1877).

An alternative

There was, however, a second reaction to the classical Lotzean approach to values, in Martin Heidegger's outright rejection of values as a false solution to a false Enlightenment problem of epistemology, a sort of sticking plaster over the fallacious division of the knowing subject from the material world. It is to Heidegger and his successors that we therefore must turn for a meaningful critique of values, and for suggestions of an alternative foundation for conservation theory.

Heidegger was another of Rickert's students, for whom values remained as essential part of the philosophical milieu as they had been for Alois Riegl. Heidegger attacked both the neo-Kantian metaphysics of value, and the Nietzschean relativised use, famously describing value as:

the impotent and threadbare disguise of the objectivity of whatever is, an objectivity that has become flat and devoid of background. No one dies for mere values. (Heidegger 1977, 142)

However, why should values be singled out in such negative terms? We must remember that in the context of Heidegger's overall project to refound philosophy, it makes no sense to rely on values to 'adhere' meaning to inanimate objects; one cannot add significance back into a world from which it has been stripped out by the reductionism of a technological/scientific world view. Heidegger's view of philosophy is quite different. Instead of epistemology, the traditional concern with how 'knowing subjects' can relate to the external material world, his concern is with ontology:

Heidegger breaks with Husserl and the Cartesian tradition by substituting for epistemological questions concerning the relation of the knower and the known ontological questions concerning what sort of beings we are and how our being is bound up with the intelligibility of the world. (Dreyfus 1991, 3)

For Heidegger, values are therefore one aspect of a false division that philosophy has made since Descartes between knowing subjects and inanimate objects. In his *Being and Time* of 1927 (1962), Heidegger uses a phenomenological method developed from Husserl, arguing that in the ordinary course of living, *Dasein* (loosely ‘human being’) does not experience the world in this dualistic way as collections of objects that ‘stand over against’ us. Rather, he insists that *Dasein* always operates within a situational context, always already intimately involved in a referential totality. He gives us his own definition of significance:

These relationships are bound up with one another as a primordial whole; they are what they are as this signifying in which *Dasein* gives itself beforehand its being-in-the-world as something to be understood. The relational whole of this signifying we call ‘significance’. This is what makes up the structure of the world – the structure of that wherein *Dasein* as such already is. (Heidegger 1962, 120)

Heidegger’s use of language can often seem opaque; this in part is a deliberate attempt to get the reader to encounter overly familiar concepts afresh, but it makes selective quotation a perilous endeavour. His essay ‘The origin of the work of art’ ([1938] 1971) presents, in somewhat simpler terms, a reflection on the proper place and role of the work of art. Locating his discussion in the Greek word *aletheia*, truth is understood not merely as correctness or correspondence, but more fundamentally as unconcealing, or disclosure, and the work of art as a primary means for that disclosure to take place. This, in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s phrase, is ‘the relevance of the beautiful’ (Gadamer 1986).

This is quite different to a view of art as aesthetics, a term only coined by Baumgarten in the mid-eighteenth century from the Greek word for feeling or sensation, and subsequently expanded on by Kant (Thomson 2011). Heidegger (1971, 25) argues that we do not experience the world through mere sensation:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g. tones and noises, in the appearance of things ... rather we hear the storm whistling in the chimney ... we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen. Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves ... In order to hear a bare sound we have to listen away from things, divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly.

Aesthetics then is an abstraction and, very much like value, is in Heidegger’s (1971, 37) view a product of misplaced Enlightenment thought: ‘The work (of art) is not a piece of equipment that is fitted out in addition with an aesthetic value that adheres to it’. Aesthetics, thus understood, provided the theoretical foundation for the emergence of connoisseurship. The subsequent development of anthropology and ethnography – marked in conservation by *The Burra Charter* and *The Nara Document* – has, as Denis Cosgrove notes, ‘established a much more fluid, negotiated, and contested idea of culture’, and makes us question:

what, if anything, we are identifying, conserving and preserving in the ‘material objects of the European canon’, beyond a set of artefacts selected according to values

established by an acquisitive bourgeoisie which reached its apotheosis in nineteenth-century Europe and sustained by the art market ever since. (Cosgrove 1994, 260)

This suggests how costly to conservation are its art-historical roots since, for Heidegger, to define art in aesthetic terms means that we no longer encounter the work itself. This provides a glimpse of the price we pay for maintaining a values-based theory, for the proper role of the work of art is something of far greater importance than mere values permit: 'To be a work means to set up a world' (Heidegger 1971, 43). He describes how:

The temple, in its standing there, first gives to things their look and to men their outlook on themselves. This view remains open as long as the work is a work, as long as the god has not fled from it. (Heidegger 1971, 42)

Yet, not all such works retain their power; the god may well flee. Even with a monument as extraordinary as the temple at Paestum, resplendent in its original setting, 'the world of the work that stands there has perished'. In the same sentence, Heidegger uses Bamberg cathedral as a parallel example; in both cases, the work is no longer what it was. 'As bygone works they stand over against us in the realm of tradition and conservation' (Heidegger 1971, 40); that is to say they have become 'mere objects'.

Nineteenth-century restoration was of course not an isolated cultural phenomenon, but rather one expression of that age's newly defined understanding of history, as amenable to comparative 'scientific' study detached from its context. By contrast, Iain Thomson comments on Heidegger's sense of ontological historicity:

Heidegger thinks that humanity's fundamental experience of reality changes over time (sometimes dramatically), and he suggests that the *work* of art helps explain the basic mechanism of this historical transformation of intelligibility. Because great art *works* inconspicuously to establish, maintain, and transform humanity's historically-variable sense of what is and what matters, Heidegger emphasizes that 'art is the becoming and happening of truth' (1971, 69) ... Put simply, great artworks help establish the implicit ontology and ethics through which an historical community understands itself and its world ... In sum, great art *works* by selectively focusing an historical community's tacit sense of what is and what matters and reflecting it back to that community, which thereby comes implicitly to understand itself in the light of this artwork. (Thomson 2011)

Interpretation

Heidegger's methodology in his earlier *Being and Time* is described as hermeneutic phenomenology (in contrast to his mentor Husserl's transcendental phenomenology), reflecting an insistence that the study of being requires interpretation. Hermeneutics is traditionally concerned with the interpretation of texts, particularly Biblical or classical texts, and Heidegger followed Dilthey in expanding its applicability. This insight subsequently found application across a wide range of disciplines; hence, for example, Moore (1990, 88) writes that:

Under hermeneutic analysis, the human subject becomes 'like' a text, because its existence can only be grasped through its works and signs, and as such it calls for a work of decipherment or interpretation.

By extension, other cultural artefacts, such as buildings, can also be 'read' as 'texts'. This 'textual metaphor' for culture implies a necessary interdisciplinarity; hence, we see an engagement with hermeneutics and phenomenology which has proved productive in the adjacent fields of (postprocessual) archaeology and anthropology:

Spurred by a heightened awareness of affinities across the disciplines and a sense of methodological impasse, social scientists are turning to literary theory and notions of the literary text as models or metaphors of culture. Clifford Geertz has been the leading proponent of this interpretivist school and its textual metaphor in American cultural anthropology. (Silverman 1990, 121)

Commenting on Geertz's hermeneutic approach to cultural anthropology, Silverman (1990, 126) notes that 'Interpretivism rests on the emphatic denial that we can understand cultural phenomena in causal terms'.

Ian Hodder is interesting as a transition figure; initially working within the positivism of processual archaeology, he used computer modelling to analyse trade and urbanisation in Iron Age and Roman Britain, but concluded it was not possible to prove causality with statistical analysis alone. Like Lewis Binford before him, he turned to ethnoarchaeology 'to establish correlations between behaviour in the present and archaeological patterning', finding that 'to understand patterning on the ground it was necessary to refer to people's attitudes and beliefs' (Johnson 2010, 103). This led him to see 'the importance of people's thoughts and symbolism, and with this a belief that cultures could not be viewed purely as adapting to an external environment: 'their' view of 'their' world was important' (Johnson 2010, 103).

By the mid-1980s, Hodder (1986, 152) was arguing for a 'critical hermeneutics':

in which interpretations are situated historically in the past and present ... [T]he end result is not a debilitating relativism in which the past is viewed as largely constructed in the present ... On the contrary, the attempt to fuse with the other, as long as it is done critically and with an awareness of difference and contextually, changes our experience and therefore changes our perspective. As already noted, the hermeneutic circle is not vicious.

The term 'hermeneutic circle' denotes the necessary interrelation of part to whole in the interpretation of a text. Heidegger (1962, 153) redefined it as foundational to our understanding of the world and ourselves within it, commenting that 'What is decisive is not to get out to the circle but to come into it in the right way'.

Meanwhile, conservation theory has paid scant attention to hermeneutics and phenomenology; one obvious exception is Cesare Brandi, who embarked on a 'phenomenological analysis of artistic creation', but his point of departure was Husserl and his engagement was with structuralism and semiology (Philippot 2005, 29), rather than with hermeneutics. More recently, Muñoz Viñas (2005, 43) promisingly described a 'communicative turn' in conservation away from a rigid focus on the material, suggesting that this turn 'has important consequences upon the entire logic of conservation'. However, he then continues:

Communication is not a physical or chemical phenomenon, nor is it an intrinsic feature of the object; rather, it depends on the subject's ability to derive a message

from the object. In contemporary conservation theory, the primary interest is therefore no longer on the objects, but rather on the subjects. Objectivism in conservation is thus replaced by certain forms of subjectivism ... (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 147)

Muñoz Viñas' 'communicative turn' thus retains the assumption of a Cartesian subject–object dualism, remaining firmly postmodern in its elevation of subjectivity, and consistent with Falser's 'container of layered memory' discussed earlier. It is therefore quite different from the hermeneutic approach outlined above, the distinction being underlined in his subsequent structuralist treatment of symbolism (Muñoz Viñas 2005, 45–50).

Hodder rightly asserts that 'There are several difficulties in the application of structuralist methods in archaeology'; with material culture:

the relationships between signifier and signified are not arbitrary – the real object, the pot, intrudes into the semiotic process. The meanings of a pot are tied up with the practical uses of a pot in everyday life. (Hodder 2005, 256)

Johnson (2010, 117) makes a similar point when he says that the material world is not reducible to (a structuralist view of) language. Again, Tilley (2005, 205) sees that:

Things are active rather than passive and we cannot interpret them in any way we like, precisely because, unlike texts, they have direct sensory effects on us. Embodied human experiences are absolutely central to a phenomenological approach.

Many of the same concerns have been given recent expression by Thrift (1996, 2008) and others in the development of Non-representational theory in the field of Human Geography. Drawing particularly on Heidegger, later Wittgenstein, Merleau-Ponty, Bourdieu and de Certeau, Thrift outlines what he terms a 'modest theory' (1996, 30) focusing on mundane human practices, 'that shape the conduct of human beings towards others and themselves in particular sites' (Thrift 1996, 127) in preference to the abstractions of theory. Non-representational theory is highly critical of Enlightenment epistemology and resolutely 'pre-individual', '[trading] in modes of perception which are not subject-based' (Thrift 2008, 7); as a result, it takes a helpfully broad view of agency in the non-human world.

Poetry and metaphor

Few would now dispute that language is far richer than a simplistic structuralist equivalence between signifier and signified allows. There is a key distinction here between two understandings of language, on the one hand as functional communication between the object and us as subjects, and on the other as fundamentally ontological, i.e. constitutive of who we are. It is this second hermeneutic sense that Winston Churchill was perhaps touching on when he famously declared, during a 1943 debate following bomb damage to the British Houses of Parliament, that 'We shape our buildings, and afterwards our buildings shape us'.

In the final section of 'The origin of the work of art', Heidegger (1971, 71) introduces language, understood not merely as communication, but as that which 'first brings beings to word and to appearance'. At its root, 'All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, essentially poetry' (Heidegger 1971, 70).

Heidegger's understanding of the central importance of hermeneutics was elaborated by others, including notably by his student Hans-Georg Gadamer, and (by a different route) Paul Ricoeur. For Ricoeur, language is inherently creative, specifically through the polysemic nature of metaphor and through narrative, which he explores in *The Rule of Metaphor* (1978) and *Time and Narrative* (1984) respectively. Ricoeur (1991, 463) tells us that the term *vive* (living) in the French title of the former work (*La Métaphore vive*):

is all important, for it was my purpose to demonstrate that there is not just an epistemological and political imagination, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a linguistic imagination which generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphoricality.

For Tilley (1999, 8), metaphor resides 'at the heart of a hermeneutic or interpretative practice in the social sciences'; it is a powerful tool for overcoming the fragmentation of an objectivist view of the world, where 'a body is a body and a pot is a pot', providing 'an interpretative thread by means of which we can weave together into a fresh constellation the brute "literal" facts of the world'. He, too, understands the creativity of metaphor:

One of the most important functions of metaphors in the process of understanding and interpreting the world is that they actively facilitate the production of novel understandings and interpretations. (Tilley 1999, 8)

Application

If we entertain Heidegger's critique of values, to what sort of alternative framework might we turn to attempt to resolve the current disjunction between theory and practice in the conservation of historic buildings? Historic churches are one type of building that serves well for testing the appropriateness of theoretical models. In a UK context, their interest lies firstly in their number – fully 45% of all grade 1 listed buildings are churches – secondly in their variety – from ancient to modern and from vernacular to high status – and thirdly, in most cases, in their status as 'living' buildings still used for the purpose for which they were built, which brings with it a pressure for change and adaptation.

Historic churches include a corpus of buildings with sufficient historical depth to have been conceived, and often substantially altered, before the modern period. A value-based theory is therefore alien to them in both their origin and much of their subsequent development, and to read such a method back into them is as anachronistic as the restoration that early conservation fought so hard to counter. A hermeneutic approach transcends this impasse. For example, Gadamer (1989, 296) tells us that romanticism 'conceived of understanding as the reproduction of an original production. Hence it was possible to say that one should be able to understand an author better than he understood himself'. Note the parallel with Viollet-le-Duc's assertion that restoration is the reinstatement of a building 'in a condition of completeness that could never have existed at any given time' (Hearn 1990, 269).

In this reading, restoration is to be opposed not because it brought change per se, but because it was such bad hermeneutics, seeking as it did to overwrite the authentic, messy, multilayered historical grain with a revisionist historiographical

ideal, a sanitised history, comfortable, consistent and neatly packaged. Morris et al. were right to be outraged at the resulting violence done to our heritage, particularly our historic churches. However, I would also argue that they were equally mistakenly ‘modern’ in their outlook, in that the resulting approach to conservation reduced the conserved artefact to a mere object from a hallowed past without creative impact in the present. As the SPAB annual report of 1891 complained:

If people really saw the true worth of our medieval churches they would realize how dangerous it is to introduce new work into old buildings. It is like putting new wine into old bottles, for both are destroyed. (Cited in Fawcett 1976, 108)

Conservation, thus defined, has no place for the creation of ‘cultural value’, and hence for ‘tomorrow’s heritage’. Orthodox conservation, beholden to a nineteenth-century art-historical understanding, is thus as bad a form of hermeneutics as the restoration it opposed.

A hermeneutic approach offers an engagement with our physical context that is both far more profound and more creative than either the reductionism of an art-historical materialist focus or the postmodern approach that subverts the multilayered cultural achievements of the past to the limited cultural horizon of the changing present. Such an approach understands time as more than merely a succession of moments, sees significance as something far richer than an agglomeration of values attached to material fabric, and at its heart holds a richly situated view of humanity.

Aside from critiquing the existing foundation of our conservation process, the purpose of this philosophical sketch is to seek an alternative foundation capable of supporting and positively enabling the responsible management of these buildings, not as dead monuments, but as living ‘art works’ in the Heideggerian sense. Cosgrove (1994, 265) saw that:

A more creative conservation, less deferential to canonical ideology, more open to the radical, the iconoclastic, and the invented, could perform the necessary task of sustaining tradition while refusing to bow to its distorting power. Attention to the creative, poetic potential of the artwork itself rather than simply to its significance as cultural heritage may help achieve that end.

Key to Cosgrove’s ‘necessary task’ is the idea of buildings as ‘living’ things, not inert but inevitably changing, as Tilley (1999, 75) suggests, possessing ‘social lives’. Modernism’s detachment from time and longing to overcome tradition accounts for what Connerton (2009, 61) describes as the ‘inverse relation between the neophilia of fashion and the taboo on speaking of death’. By contrast, historic buildings are refreshingly unfashionable, speaking to us across time, the sort of ‘conversation’ which Gadamer (1989, 306) referred to as a ‘fusion of horizons’ between reader and text:

In a tradition this process of fusion is continually going on, for there old and new are always combining into something of living value, without either being explicitly foregrounded from the other.

A tradition, then, requires constant renewal, without which it becomes moribund; this is why conservation requires a much more nuanced understanding of history; attempts to prevent this necessary renewal turn tradition into something quite else, an empty historicist formalism.

Narrative

While it is important that the conservation professions commit to a re-engagement of theory and practice, a challenge of equal importance is how to communicate the broader message in less abstract theoretical terms to those non-professional volunteers responsible for the upkeep of so many historic buildings. Managers of cultural heritage readily understand that narrative is hugely helpful in engaging public interest – ‘everyone loves a good story’. As Ricoeur (1984) saw so clearly, it is because we are time-bound that narrative is so foundational for understanding ourselves and, by extension, material culture. For, as Thomas (1995, 211) suggests, ‘the only way in which human beings can conceptualise self-identity is in narrative. The self is dispersed through time and is drawn together in a kind of story’.

A narrative approach to historic buildings acknowledges that in most cases that ‘story’ has not reached its conclusion (*contra* SPAB, 1891, above), and that to declare it closed is, somehow, to bring its life to a premature end. This ‘killing off’ of what should be ‘living’ buildings is implicit within a values-based methodology which is predicated on identifying abstract universals unbound by time and place, and which is only deployed in the first place as an attempt to salvage some meaning from a world where knowing subjects are split apart from the material world. As Guignon (2006, 4) remarks in outlining Heidegger’s challenge to the tradition of western philosophy, ‘when we step back and try to get an impartial, objective view of things, the world, so to speak, goes dead for us – things lose the meaningfulness definitive of their being in the everyday life-world’. It is for this reason that a values-based methodology is unhelpful for the responsible management of the historic environment.

By contrast, to see a building as narrative is to acknowledge that the built environment is more than just a backdrop – ‘mere cladding’ in Thrift’s phrase (Thrift 2008, 9) – against which we act out our lives, but is itself an active partner in our self-composition. Seeing a building as an ongoing and developing narrative is to acknowledge the relevance of the community’s story to date – the building’s biography – but also invites us to wonder where the ‘story’ might go next. An understanding of narrative engages us and awakens us to the need, the responsibility even, to take that ‘story’ forward; in writing the next chapter, we must understand how the plot has developed thus far, and how to drive that plot onwards. Crucially we should not imagine that our ‘chapter’ will be the last, but instead we have a duty to our ‘co-authors’ to leave space for those who follow after us to write theirs.

Several aspects of narrative recommend it above a values-based theory. First, as deployed in moral philosophy, narrative helps to explain the processes of change, and continuing identity, of personality amidst the development that comes with time. Wells (1998, 44) summarises the issue thus:

Ethics vary because agents vary; meanwhile agents themselves change and grow in the course of their lives, while remaining the same person. Thus narrative is helpful both in establishing the tradition that unites various agents, and in conveying the identity of a person whose character has developed in the course of their life.

Conservation is all about the identification of character, its safeguarding, nurture and, if possible, enhancement. And, it is precisely in narrative that we discover and explore character. This suggests that narrative has a deeper and richer foundation than its typical use hitherto within conservation, which has tended to take the form

of 'biography', that is, in terms of completed narrative, or mere chronology. It is therefore well placed to serve as the theoretical foundation of conservation as the management of change.

Second, meaning constructed out of values is fundamentally subjective. In a relativistic age of extrinsic values, this subjectivity is reduced to 'what is meaningful for me', and the identification of meaning entails a tortuous trading between different categories of values for which there is no common currency. Narrative, by contrast, is fundamentally communal to start with, and therefore stands more chance of providing that much sought-after *lingua franca*, answering Mason's (2002) concern for a shared framework. Where change is successfully negotiated and consensus arrived at with a local community, it is usually in the form of the articulation of a coherent narrative that is first articulated, then shared, and finally owned by the community.

Who it is that decides on the right course of action, even with narrative, remains a live question, but there is a third pragmatic aspect to narrative that helps address this – narrative has broad appeal across society, and an understanding of historical narrative is increasingly seen as relevant to our understanding of who we collectively are. Indeed, narrative is an essential element in the constitution of community: 'Through its recitation, a story is incorporated into a community which it gathers together' (Ricoeur 1980, 176).

Fourth, narrative is by definition a temporal structure bringing present, past and future into some form of coherent whole; it therefore of its nature suggests a rootedness in a non-modernistic understanding of time as more than a mere succession of moments. As Crites (1971, 303) makes clear:

Narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form. But this incipient story, implicit in the very possibility of experience, must be such that it can absorb both the chronicle of memory and the scenario of anticipation, absorb them within a richer narrative form without effacing the difference between the determinacy of the one and the indeterminacy of the other.

Fifth, a narrative approach allows space for the sort of non-human agency discussed by Thrift (1996, 2008), for the building itself to be an active character in the story. Sixth, narrative in moral philosophy presents a richer understanding of tradition, as being central to how we understand the world; thus for Lucie-Smith (2007, 5):

The idea of a continuing tradition implies that the authorities of the past are not fossilised but are sources of continuing understanding. ... The narrative is always open to further explication and exploration and is constantly being enriched by a return to the sources of authority.

Surely, narrative should be of interest, relevance and, indeed, central importance, to a conservation that seeks to preserve and maintain the objects of that tradition.

Finally, as Ricoeur (1991, 464) insists, narrative is central to the meaning of human existence itself:

As Hannah Arendt points out, the meaning of human existence is not just the power to change or master the world, but also the ability to be remembered and recollected in narrative discourse, to be *memorable*. These existential and historical implications of narrativity are very far-reaching, for they determine what is to be 'preserved' and rendered 'permanent' in a culture's sense of its own past, of its own 'identity'.

Given that the concern of conservation is precisely that which is ‘preserved’ in this way, narrative recommends itself as the foundation for conservation theory.

A narrative approach would, I believe, transform conservation theory, and empower those brave volunteers who care for our heritage. For example, a Statement of Significance seen as narrative would be transformed from an imposed chore into a voyage of discovery capable of transforming our self-understanding, for both professional and non-professional alike. Historic buildings overflow with an abundance of narrative, whether personal, communal or cultural; only a narrative approach rooted in a hermeneutic understanding can do justice to them as more than mere art-historical objects on the one hand, or Falser’s ‘containers’ for anything we choose to put in them on the other.

Much, quite rightly, has been made in the last decade of ‘informed conservation’ (Clark 2001), and it would be easy for some to understand this call to narrative as being subsumed within it, reduced to the record of the different stages of the building’s development. This ‘timeline’ approach needs to be supplemented with a feel for the building as a character, an understanding of the practices that brought it into being and which it in turn has engendered, and how it has been an active participant in the formation of a community through time. To take the example of a medieval church, this will involve at least an understanding of both medieval and current religious practice, and of the building’s role in focusing its community. It is only with these strands of narrative that we can understand the significance of a place in its specificity, and therefore to practise a genuinely ‘informed conservation’.

Conclusion

Historic buildings therefore question the art-historical base of conservation, our broader understanding of art itself and, ultimately, what it means to be human. As Heidegger (1971, 75) says:

... art is by nature an origin: a distinctive way in which truth comes into being, that is, becomes historical ... Do we know, which means do we give heed to, the nature of the origin? Or, in our relation to art, do we still merely make appeal to a cultivated acquaintance with the past?

A historic building stands as a forthright expression of Heidegger’s challenge: do we approach these historic buildings as mere art history, content to make this appeal to ‘a cultivated acquaintance with the past’, or do we see them as world-disclosing art works from which the gods may not yet have fled?

Inherent in embracing this challenge will be a transformation in the understanding of conservation as the management of change. A narrative-based conservation philosophy holds out the promise of resolving the harmful disjunction in contemporary practice between theory and application, and perhaps to restore its societal credibility. Where for Riegl ‘the observation of Historic Value sees the monument as a historic document that means to stop further decay and not to add anything’ (Lehne 2010, 72), we must be willing to exchange our fixation with the fragility of the physical fabric for a deeper, more flexible and more nourishing understanding of the resilience of place, and see our historic buildings as ongoing narratives which we may form as co-authors, and in turn be formed by.

Note

1. This discussion of value theory is drawn from Sluga (1993, 1999, 2005).

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