Heritage Futures

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Uncertainty, collaboration and emerging issues

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“How is the uncertainty of the deep future conceived of and managed in different fields of conservation practice?” When we designed our original research question, we assumed we would find not only a variety of possible responses to the widespread understanding that it is hard to know much about the future – and even harder, the longer you think ahead – but also a variety of answers reflecting the different legacy-related practices we were studying. However, we learned quickly that this was not the case. A perception of the future in terms of risks, managed to anticipate threats and prevent loss, generally prevailed wherever we looked. Our research interest therefore moved in a new direction as we began to explore to what extent one might turn an apparent challenge into an opportunity by envisioning uncertainty as desirable for conservation practice – and indeed for heritage management. The specific examples that we got to know better during the course of our research illustrated that uncertainty does indeed hold opportunities, and may even be preferable to a future we could be certain about, even in terms of conservation.

In short, uncertainty is desirable because it opens the door for change. As much as every transformation provides obstacles, it also offers opportunities (see also Part V, Transformation). We cannot hold back the flow of time and history. Nothing is ever given; nothing can be conserved indefinitely. The limits of planning have been summed up by Steve Fuller (2013, n.p.): ‘You can be sure that if a model says the world will end in 50 years, the model itself will be gone in 25.’ Further, if we would like things to be different to how they are now – good news! They will be. If we shift our view of the future to flow, then we recentre ourselves. We can and we should push the flow as we want it to be (see also Chapter 26).
Obviously, future heritage users will have their own priorities and interpretations. Heritage, after all, is a social and interpretive practice. As Chapman ([2018], n.p.) argues, regarding historical scholarship, ‘historians of the future have the same rights to cognitive self-determination as historians in the present: it is not our place to seek to define and constrain future possibilities’. Moreover, just as our children make their own lives, partly in opposition to what they receive from us, future generations will make their own futures. UNESCO may see heritage as a gift from the past to the future (Von Droste zu Hülshoff, [2006]; see further discussion in Chapters 1 and 2 of this book), but an unwanted gift can be a burden. How can we know whether future generations will want these gifts? (May, forthcoming).

Uncertainty, in our framing, allows for freedom and creativity, for broad participation and engagement, and for exploiting favourable circumstances. But uncertainty also demands responsibility and invites affection, love and care for living beings. Indeed, for all the uncertainty there is, maybe all that matters in the end is a mindset of love, and care – much in the way that parents feel for the next generation of humans (Adam and Groves [2007; 2011]). The complexity of this care, and the ways that it takes account of the more-than-human, is a key question in contemporary ethics (for example, Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) and, indeed, is a core concern across all four of the themes in this book. This is most obvious within our research in the exploration of shepherding as heritage practice. It is care in the present that creates a desirable future. It is also apparent in our assessment of space messaging on Twitter. When asked to send a message to the future, people are overwhelmingly gentle, personal. The anthropomorphism of robotic spacecraft elicits care and affection.

But how do we show genuine affection, love and care when it comes to designing nuclear waste repositories? Perhaps the Dutch intermediate repository for nuclear waste, which we visited in autumn 2017 outside Vlissingen, can suggest a way to draw ethics of care from one domain to the next. Recognising that it will be a century before there is sufficient waste or resource to build a final geological repository, the Netherlands has built a temporary repository for the next century. It is designed to keep the material safe, but also to keep the question of its long-term future in the minds of the Dutch people. In cooperation with artists, the buildings are painted in bright colours, with the chemical formula of the waste in large letters. The building for spent fuel will be repainted a different colour every 10 years to remind people that the material inside is changing. The design keeps the attention of the present, not by frightening us, but by making it
intriguing and welcoming engagement (Codée and Verhoef 2015). If we begin with care in the present, we can care for the future.

However, heritage practice also does constrain future possibilities, by choosing what pasts to push into the future and, indeed, in other choices with political, social and economic ramifications. While historians of the future may have cognitive self-determination, we still have some influence on the material and social worlds in which they operate. This concern for the welfare of future generations is one of the reasons why it matters what we do today, not least regarding the cultural heritage and other legacies we are going to leave behind (Holtorf and Högb erg forthcoming b). We are not responsible for making future people happy, but, while acknowledging the specific conditions of uncertainty both as a threat and as an opportunity, we can attempt to make decisions from which they might really benefit. This involves a commitment to be explicit about what futures individuals and organisations are planning for, how they are addressing the ways in which the future will differ from the present, and how exactly they think their work in the present will benefit people in the future. A logical next step would be to move from a comparative analysis of different ways of future-making in contemporary heritage and conservation practices, as we have presented in this book, to planning for specific possible uses and benefits of heritage in future communities.

Lessons from collaborations across four domains

An important insight from our research is that collaboration with non-academic partners inevitably has different aims than the academic pursuit of knowledge and debate, conducted in forums such as academic conferences or publications. Martin Kunze of the Memory of Mankind project (MOM) was always keen to learn how to improve on his own long-term storage project in the Austrian Alps. Both Gustavo Araoz of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) and Giovanni Boccardi of UNESCO (who was meeting us in a non-institutional capacity) had their own far-reaching ideas for the future development of heritage theory and heritage management in the context of various policies, and they very much appreciated the inspiration and critical feedback we offered them. All three had strong intellectual interests, connected with their own practices. Although that made conversations easy, it was also clear that they were interested primarily to advance their own specific activities and not so much in our larger academic project trying to synthesise and theorise, eventually resulting in academic publications such as the present book.
Our collaborators from Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Company (SKB) were mostly interested in demonstrating to wider audiences that the challenges of long-term, safe storage of nuclear waste are connected to other domains in society, and not unique to them; they wanted to connect their own questions about the future with those of others in society and therefore welcomed the opportunity to come into contact with other contemporary future projects, not least to establish their own endeavours as a case study in the academic field of heritage studies. Similarly, Jon Lomberg of the One Earth Message project expressed that, for him, our project was an opportunity to cast as wide a net as possible in attracting interest and support in his own future-related project. He also appreciated that our invitation had enabled him to fly from Hawaii, where he lives, to Europe for a publicity and marketing tour to attract support for his space message project. Both partners formulated aims and expectations of our collaboration that were far from our own, but of course they made perfect sense from their perspectives.

Initially such responses made us question the purpose of collaboration in an academic project. But we realised quickly that what we had gained was in fact insight into how to make our work relevant to partners in society at large and, thus, even from an academic perspective, how to make our work more significant than it might otherwise have been. There is strong demand for academic expertise beyond academia, but that demand does not necessarily match how we may prefer to see and portray ourselves as academic researchers. If we seek to make a direct impact on society with academic research, which of course we should, the first step is to learn to listen and to be willing to collaborate on equal terms with partners pursuing their own agendas. We learned that it takes time and commitment to generate understanding for each other’s work, engender mutual respect and build trust between partners in different sectors and professions. Although they do not need be uncritical, such collaborations require a willingness to advance unfamiliar agendas and to try new formats. That does not necessarily sit well with the short time frames and expected levels of output recognised by academic funding bodies and recruitment panels. But this only shows where academia still has a lot to learn itself. Our work has most certainly benefited our collaborative partners in the way they had hoped. This will continue to do so while we remain in contact with each other: as with academic partnerships, such collaborations continue in various ways even after a project has formally ended.

At the same time, there are also academically important lessons for our research topic, which we learned from the collaboration and which we think are relevant to our partners too. In particular, our
comparative approach has allowed us to recognise and appreciate some of the important contributions that each of our domains has to offer the others, which was one of the main aims of the research programme as a whole (see discussion in Part I, Heritage futures). These are as follows:

- The nuclear waste sector shows how future planning can be done systematically and professionally. The cultural heritage sector in particular can draw inspiration from that work to overcome its own professional naivety regarding the future (Högberg et al. 2017).
- The cultural heritage sector, including World Heritage Site management, has come a long way in appreciating and managing the politics and ethics of heritage and the need to involve multiple stakeholders in its work; other realms, such as nuclear waste, space messages and even the MOM project, can learn that social contestation is part of the normal state of affairs of all legacy management and heritage processes, not a kind of negative interference. The resulting tensions, and the way they are overcome together with other stakeholders, eventually make the significance of heritage in society stronger, not weaker (Harrison 2013a).
- The deep-space message excels in prompting us all to consider heritage in terms of our collective legacy on Earth, transcending the boundaries that are dividing humanity. This challenges UNESCO and ICOMOS in particular on how to select and conserve a human legacy on Earth that may create genuine human unity, rather than local and national distinction and division.
- The long-term information storage at MOM facilitates broad participation in society and mobilises not only citizens and families but also a range of different organisations in society in long-term legacy work. The underlying commitment to inclusivity and the implied willingness to embrace a profusion of information creates benefits in societal resonance that should be very attractive even to a space message from humanity, the undertaking of building a final repository for nuclear waste, and not least the sustainable management of cultural heritage.

One of the key findings of our research is that managing uncertain human futures with the help of different manifestations of cultural heritage can benefit from the four specific strengths just described: systematic planning, appreciating relevant politics and ethics, transcendence of boundaries dividing humanity, and broad participation in society.
The various domains we have worked with illustrate the specific benefits that each strength offers. If nothing else, this suggests to the professional cultural heritage sector that solely expert-driven conservation and legal protection anticipating specific threats is not good enough, even if relevant stakeholders are invited to participate in this work. In order to be prepared for an uncertain future, the cultural heritage sector will benefit from more systematic planning, transcending existing boundaries and facilitating broad participation across a range of different sectors in society.

Issues emerging for the future

The assumption that the future is mostly significant to present-day heritage management insofar as it holds risks and threats to preservation is ultimately problematic. Saving or rescuing heritage is not necessarily by default the most appropriate strategy for sustainable development and a better future for humanity. However, the sincere commitment of many professional colleagues and our collaborative partners to save or rescue heritage demands respect. For them, if we put enough effort into it, we can ensure that past legacies are preserved, or that future populations will not be harmed by nuclear waste, or that non-humans will understand our space messages, or that the tiles deposited in MOM will be discoverable in thousands of years.

On the other hand, many social benefits of heritage are not threatened by destruction, and they may be renewable (Holtorf 2015). There may even be significant gains from destruction, as the planetarium in Montreal reminded us (which we visited in connection with attending a major conference in the city): after the dinosaurs died out, partly due to a meteorite impact, mass extinction proved to be a source of renewal as new life forms emerged, in that case paving the way for the emergence of humans on Earth (see also the discussion of biodiversity and evolutionary models in Chapter 6). Similarly, as we argued in Chapter 19, on ‘Toxic heritage’, there may be heritages and materials it would be good to get rid of. Not all change is a threat, and destruction can be an opportunity as well as a risk. An alternative strategy, replacing tropes of risk and threats, may therefore be based on notions of change, growth and transformation (Holtorf 2015; DeSilvey 2017; papers in DeSilvey and Harrison 2020).

The persistence of a preservation-focused future orientation may relate to our desire for personal persistence, or, to see it from the other side, our fear of death. Terror Management Theory (or TMT) posits that awareness of our own mortality is implicated in identification with groups
and ideals that we believe will survive beyond our lifetimes (Reicher 2014; Sani et al. 2009). The greater our anxiety about impending death, the stronger our affiliation with, and defence of, the values, beliefs and heritages of groups we identify with, ‘because groups that extend beyond one’s mere personal existence, both backward and forward in time, and that are perceived as long-lasting and quasi-eternal entities, are potent symbols of transcendence’ (Sani et al. 2009, 244).

While the future will never become the present, always slipping forward into the yet-to-be, we still have responsibilities to those who come after us. They are not simply abstract vessels of our current anxieties. Part of the discussion of nuclear waste management has involved formal ethical consideration of our responsibilities to future generations. In 1995, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) issued the Principles of Radioactive Waste Management as a part of its safety series. According to Principle 5, the waste shall be managed ‘in such a way that will not impose undue burdens on future generations’ (Bråkenhielm 2015, 397).

In Sweden, this ethical consideration has been described as the principle of (intergenerational) autonomy, ‘in which every generation should have the autonomy to manage and use spent nuclear fuel in whichever way they see fit’ (Bråkenhielm 2015, 399). What if we were to apply this principle to heritage? For instance, many of the commemorative regimes associated with the centenary of the First World War require that future generations do the emotional labour of remembering our war dead. The principle of intergenerational autonomy would require us to manage that heritage in such a way that future generations had no responsibility for it and could do whatever they see fit.

In this situation, our research focus eventually came to move beyond the notion of uncertainty, and started to address a widely felt need to promote sustainability and foster resilience for future generations (Holtorf 2018). Sustainability requires resilience, and ultimately depends on the ability to embrace change and absorb disturbance. Sustainability is thus not necessarily based on preservation, but rather on the ability to adapt to loss and transformation. This insight may provide the biggest challenge for the cultural heritage sector in the broadest sense, relating as it does to all four of the themes explored in this book. What does it mean for the legacies we leave behind to be able to absorb loss and transformation? To make it specific, how are World Heritage Sites and nuclear waste repositories to reckon with loss and transformation? Or how can a space message or a deep storage facility absorb disturbance and still be meaningful? The toolbox of heritage professionals will need to contain more items than conservation and preservation in order to be equipped
to provide solutions for such issues. In the next part of the book (following the visual essay documenting the third of our three cross-programme knowledge-exchange events, on Transforming Loss), we turn to consider certain cases in the management of heritage in which change is acknowledged, actively managed for and even embraced.

According to the Long Now Foundation (Brand 2008), the most important aspect of future thinking is not to anticipate in detail what will happen and plan now for all eventualities. Instead we need to integrate future thinking into everyday decision-making, being aware of the future we assume in the decisions we make and the practices in which we engage, while realising that there are alternatives. In that sense, it may be more important to keep asking about the future than to have good answers. This is related to the idea of futures literacy, where students are asked to interrogate specific anticipated futures for their underpinning assumptions. This allows humans to act in the present to work towards desired futures, rather than simply bracing against seemingly inevitable futures (see also Sandford and Cassar forthcoming).

Our research has examined practices in heritage and related domains. It has given us a clearer understanding of the assumed futures inherent in these practices, but more importantly raised further questions about alternative futures that could be assembled through development of these practices. These are issues which are foregrounded in the following part of the book, which focuses on the theme of transformation.