

Sustaining Places in Action: Facilitating Community Involvement in Heritage Stewardship by Co-Creation, Leif Harald Fredheim

In light of recent cuts to public spending in the United Kingdom, the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) has established projects to raise the capacity of local volunteer communities to take a more active role in heritage stewardship. In co-operation with the Department of Archaeology at the University of York, CBA research has led to the establishment of the Local Heritage Engagement Network,¹ which aids individuals and local groups' campaigns for their historic environments. More recently, the collaborative 'Adopting Archaeology' project has been initiated, which is investigating the sustainability and impact of community-led heritage stewardship projects. While other projects involve communities in stewarding places,² the Adopting Archaeology project is concerned with sustaining actions of place stewardship. While the project was created in response to perceived threats and risk, professional and academic literature is littered with calls for local and inclusive approaches to archaeological and heritage practice. Through governmental ratification, the European Landscape Convention³ plays an important role in authorising these alternative approaches;⁴ nevertheless, the extent to which ratification has led to increased participatory practice is questionable.

While there are a number of reasons for the lack of community agency in archaeological and heritage management, entrenched perceptions of 'expertise' and the practical challenges of participatory approaches, not least financial concerns, are important factors. As the number of local councils announcing crippling cuts to heritage services continues to increase,⁵ public involvement in heritage management will become a necessity, not merely an idealistic dream. The impending absence of professional expertise can therefore be considered an opportunity to override professional concerns of the public's capability to steward heritage responsibly. However, the voluntary sector has not been prepared; it is surely naïve to believe that participatory approaches, recognized as expensive and inefficient,⁶ can be enacted without professional support, at no cost. Concurrently, the question of whether professional archaeologists, conservation architects and heritage managers *should* be replaced by volunteers must be considered.⁷ Nevertheless, the changing landscape of heritage stewardship in the UK can be considered one of both threat and opportunity, requiring both advocacy and action. The co-creation of a digital platform to increase the sustainability of community-led heritage stewardship projects is one such action proposed by the CBA. Although tailored to current financial and digital realities in the UK, it may also be applicable elsewhere.

Diversifying Landscape Identification and Interpretation

The European Landscape Convention, asserts that members of the public should play active roles in the decision-making processes of landscape management. It defines a landscape as ‘an area, as perceived by people’⁸ and explicitly includes ‘everyday or degraded landscapes,’⁹ stressing that ‘procedures for the participation of the general public’¹⁰ must be established, to allow all interested parties to participate in the identification, analysis and monitoring of landscapes¹¹ and to contribute toward assessments of landscapes’ values.¹² Public consultation is performed in the management of high-profile landscapes, such as Hadrian’s Wall,¹³ but is this the case for less recognized landscapes, or indeed, where no specific ‘landscape’ has been identified? So-called ‘stakeholder consultation’ is generally time-consuming and thereby expensive; furthermore, the professional language of heritage values may implicitly marginalize opinions voiced by members of the public,¹⁴ as may the means by which consultation is performed. Practical issues such as these limit the extent to which participatory approaches are implemented in practice for all categories of heritage, yet are perhaps most acutely apparent in the case of landscapes due to their scale, complexity and public nature.

One of the planned features of the proposed CBA platform is a digital tool for capturing and communicating interpretations of heritage and its values. The platform will be a co-creative venture from its inception in order to instil a ‘participatory culture’,¹⁵ utilising social media and physical encounters between people and heritage. The intention is to adopt Stephenson’s ‘Cultural Values Model’ for capturing landscape significance, which accommodates the identification of forms, practices (or processes) and relationships as heritage.¹⁶ Each user will be allocated a page they can populate with text, images, audio and video that together communicate each user’s interpretation of their local heritage. Users may interact with each other’s pages to create rich webs of local perspectives that highlight the complex, both fiercely personal and inherently public, multivocal and often contested nature of heritage and its ‘social values.’ It is hoped that by utilising an inclusive typological language for capturing interpretations and developing intuitive interfaces for their communication, this feature of the platform will support the diversification of landscape identification and interpretation.

The open definition of landscape in the European Landscape Convention allows anything, ‘the entire surface of the planet,’ in fact, to be identified as a landscape.¹⁷ While it is becoming more common for non-professionals to be asked to contribute their interpretations of heritage, volunteers are rarely included in identifying heritage.¹⁸ The use of a digital

database and interface that can synthesize and connect individual perspectives will allow landscapes to be conceived organically, at a scale that is appropriate to each context, rather than be predetermined or identified from the outset. By contributing series of individual posts, geographic and conceptual landscapes will come to be, consisting of the identified forms, practices/processes and relationships. As people who identify common heritage features are connected to each other, shared landscapes will be identified, facilitating the formation of communities of interest of which members want to be a part¹⁹ that can develop ‘collective memory’²⁰ and common heritage agendas.

Why Digital?

Most digital heritage projects involve digitising heritage,²¹ processing digitized data by transcribing text or describing images and video²² or communicating set narratives.²³ Digitized heritage can be accessed and analysed more effectively, even remotely. However, digital heritage can be much more.²⁴ Anyone working with qualitative research methods will be aware that processing interview and questionnaire data can be as time consuming as data collection. If this consultation data was instead born digital, attention could be focused directly on analysis. Digital methods also allow effective sharing of access, which can be used to move beyond mere consultation, which can be perceived as tokenistic,²⁵ to more interactive and transparent forms of participation. The platform feature proposed by the CBA will allow users to interact with each other’s perspectives and see how their views relate to those of others. Furthermore, the use of a digital platform allows users to contribute their views at their own convenience. This encourages the perception that heritage is an everyday concern for everyone about which views are continuously changing, as opposed to the notion that heritage and interpretations of heritage are immutable and communicable during a single consultative interaction. It also facilitates the development of a current and accessible source of information for decision-making.

It is worth pausing to recognize the weaknesses of digitising stakeholder consultation. As Richardson has gone to some length to demonstrate, issues of digital illiteracy and the ‘digital divide’ are complex and have very real consequences for the implementation of digital technology in approaches to public archaeology and heritage.²⁶ Furthermore, while digital methods, especially those that ‘crowdsource’ voluntary contributions, have been promoted as cost-saving, it is increasingly apparent that digital participatory projects are often more expensive than traditional approaches due to high design costs and the continuous need for maintenance and updates. Perry and Beale have highlighted the lack of critical reflection on

the use of the social web by archaeologists and heritage professionals and the real possibility that digital projects can cause ‘disempowerment and abuse’ rather than ‘emancipation and egalitarianism.’²⁷ These concerns are equally applicable to the proposed platform as a whole and are addressed by the co-creative nature of the project.

Co-creative Processes and Co-created Products

The Adopting Archaeology project asks whether communities take an active role in stewarding their own heritage, how sustainable their stewardship efforts are and how NGOs such as the CBA can make community-led heritage stewardship more sustainable. It is hoped that the proposed digital platform will help provide a basic level of support that the CBA does not have the capacity to offer on an individual basis. A key purpose for the platform is also to connect different community groups with each other to share resources and expertise.

Emphasis will be placed on providing and sharing resources for training as opposed to services that create dependency in order to promote personal development and community resilience. In line with this mission, the project will be co-creative from its inception to help participants recognize their own expertise and experience partnership working with peers in their community and professional specialists. Participants’ involvement in communicating their interpretations of local heritage and designing a digital tool to capture, communicate and analyse these interpretations, with a view of synthesising statements of significance for strategic decision-making, is intended to instil confidence and develop clearer understandings of heritage, heritage management decision-making processes and the potential role of volunteer communities in these processes.

Co-creation has also been selected as the process for design and production of the CBA platform in order to ensure it responds to real needs in heritage stewardship communities, is practical to use and encourages diversity of users and perspectives on heritage. The quality of design and coding is of little consequence if potential users are not interested in the functionality provided.²⁸ As already noted, levels of digital literacy in heritage stewardship communities vary considerably, in this regard accessibility is a complex subject. Cross-platform access from social media sites such as Twitter is likely to be equally important to attract those who are most digitally active. It is easy to assume that online platforms inherently promote diversity and democracy; however, studies of user demographics on platforms such as Wikipedia have contested this.²⁹ By ensuring diversity among participants in the co-creation of the platform, the CBA hopes to facilitate diversity through digital design that is sustained by diverse moderators.

Developing a sense of ownership of the platform among co-creative participants is central to its sustainability. While it will be possible to fund the creation of the platform by grant money, grants are not a sustainable source of income. Equally important is the intention to involve stewardship communities in sustaining the service that facilitates their sustainability, in order to transfer agency for heritage stewardship, as opposed to perpetuating dependency. While the University of York and the CBA are initiating the co-creation of the platform and the CBA is committed to hosting it, the long-term role of the CBA is intended to be one of support rather than initiative. Together, academics, professionals and volunteers will be creating a platform for volunteers, to be monitored and managed by volunteer communities; a successful co-creative process is essential for realising this ideal. By developing the various features of the proposed platform through iterative stages of action research, providing participants with the support needed to develop functionality that satisfies their own needs as potential users, it is hoped participants will have developed the capacity and motivation to maintain and modify platform content.

Facilitating Sustained Action

Unlike many crowdsourcing and citizen science projects, which ask volunteers to perform professional tasks,³⁰ the proposed platform is intended to share knowledge and skills within and between stewardship communities, and can therefore be better understood as community-sourcing.³¹ While professional expertise will be utilized in the creation of the platform, the nature of digital platforms allows this expertise to be stored at the time of creation and accessed when required in the future. Co-creating the platform is likely to be more expensive than simply commissioning a platform from a professional company, but in the current financial climate where heritage is increasingly dependent on grant funding, an expensive co-creative process that enables user communities is more sustainable than one that is perpetually dependent on renewed grants, irrespective of overall costs. Furthermore, the transfer of agency for sustaining heritage stewardship to local communities can only increase the social relevance and vibrancy of heritage, which are arguably crucial to developing and sustaining places in action.

By connecting developments in Critical Heritage Studies to current issues facing the management of archaeological sites, Emerick has demonstrated how narrow interpretations of heritage and expert-led heritage management processes have ‘shorn ... local associations’, preventing communities from connecting with their local heritage.³² Despite their explicit inclusion in many value typologies for heritage management, ‘social values’ continue to be

marginalized in heritage decision-making.³³ A transfer of agency in heritage stewardship to local communities cannot be made upon the assumption that the marginalisation of ‘social values’ should continue; while many local communities, no doubt, value professional interpretations of heritage highly, authority must be shared if volunteers are to take on the responsibilities of paid professionals. The development of a means to capture, communicate and integrate ‘social values’ with professional assessments of heritage is therefore the first stage of the CBA’s digital strategy for developing and sustaining heritage stewardship places in action. Once a current database of ‘social values’ is established and communities have developed confidence in their own capacity to contribute meaningfully to heritage stewardship, the process of developing the necessary infrastructure to support community involvement in heritage stewardship can continue.

Conclusion

The co-creation of a digital tool for capturing, processing and communicating interpretations of local heritage and its values is the first stage of a project to develop a digital product by a transformative process that together will facilitate the sustainability of community-led heritage stewardship projects. The overarching emphasis of the platform is on training and sharing, determining platform features and development processes. In conclusion, it is worth considering why documents like the European Landscape Convention are so adamant that communities should be involved in every stage of heritage stewardship, from identification to decision-making and implementation. While participatory approaches may produce more appropriate decisions, the participatory processes themselves are equally important. Such processes can transform citizens from ‘consumers’ to ‘producers’ in a society of ‘social productivity’, where citizens co-produce public services.³⁴ Approaches to heritage stewardship can play a part in this transformation; arguably, they must, for heritage to be considered relevant and more than a luxury, thereby justifying public attention and public spending.

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Biographical Note

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² Two examples of projects that encourage community participation in heritage stewardship are the 'Maintenance Co-Operatives' project run by the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (<http://www.spabmcp.org.uk/>) and 'Adopt-a-Monument' by Archaeology Scotland (<http://www.archaeologyscotland.org.uk/our-projects/adopt-monument>).

³ Council of Europe, 'European Landscape Convention', Accessed 22 February 2016: <http://www.coe.int/en/web/conventions/full-list/-/conventions/rms/0900001680080621>.

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- ⁸ Council of Europe, *European Landscape*, §1a.
- ⁹ *ibid.* §2
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* §5c
- ¹¹ *ibid.* §6C1a
- ¹² *ibid.* §6C1b
- ¹³ P. Stone and D. Brough (eds.), *Managing, Using, and Interpreting Hadrian's Wall as World Heritage*, (New York: Springer, 2014).
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- ²¹ See L. M. Hughes, *Digitizing Collections*, (London: Facet, 2004); L. MacDonald (ed.), *Digital Heritage: Applying Digital Imaging to Cultural Heritage*, (Oxford; Burlington, MA: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2006); S. Robson, S. MacDonald, G. Were and M. Hess, '3D Recording and Museums', in C. Warwick, M. Terras and J. Nyhan (eds.), *Digital Humanities in Practice*, (London: Facet, 2012), pp. 91-115; M. Terras, 'Digitization and Digital Resources in the Humanities', in C. Warwick, M. Terras and J. Nyhan (eds.), *Digital Humanities in Practice*, (London: Facet, 2012), pp. 40-70.
- ²² See M. Ridge (ed.), *Crowdsourcing our Cultural Heritage*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014) for many examples (chapters by Blaser, Causer and Terras, Dafis *et al.*, Eccles and Greg, Lascarides and Vershbow, Leon and Oomen *et al.*; see also AnnoTate, 'About AnnoTate', Accessed 22 February 2016: <https://anno.tate.org.uk/#/about>; MarineLives, 'MarineLives', Accessed 22 February 2016: <http://www.marinelives.org/wiki/MarineLives>; R. Marselis and L. M. Schütze, "'One Way to Holland": Migrant heritage and Social Media', in K. Drotner and K. C. Schröder (eds.), *Museum Communication and Social Media: The Connected Museum*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 75-92; Y. Raimond, T. Ferne, M. Smethurst and G. Adams, 'The BBC World Service Archive Prototype', *Journal of Web Semantics* 27, pp. 1-10; Smithsonian, 'Smithsonian Digital Volunteers: Transcription Center', Accessed 22 February 2016: <https://transcription.si.edu/>.
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http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2012/papers/enhancing_museum_narratives_with_the_qrator_pr; A. Witcomb, *Re-Imagining the Museum: Beyond the Mausoleum*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁴ Giaccardi, *Heritage and Social Media*; Ridge, *Crowdsourcing*.

²⁵ K. Fouseki, "'Community Voices, Curatorial Choices": Community Consultation for the 1807 Exhibitions' *Museum and Society* 8 (3), pp. 180-192.

²⁶ L. J. Richardson 2014. *Public Archaeology in a Digital Age*. <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1436367/> PhD thesis, UCL. See also N. J. Bidwell and H. Winschiers-Theophilus, 'Extending Connections between Land and People Digitally: Designing with Rural Herero Communities in Namibia', in E. Giaccardi (ed.), *Heritage and Social Media: Understanding Heritage in a Participatory Culture*, (London; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 197-216 for debunking neutrality of digital media and problematizing their appropriateness for capturing heritage.

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