

PEOPLING THE HERITAGE

To what extent is democratization of
built heritage management possible and desirable?

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Introduction

This paper is about democratization of built heritage management. How far can we go trying to bring monuments closer to people? Many questions in heritage field remain unanswered. I'm expecting this to be one of them. This question is bound to be of very subjective nature and depend in large part of certain country's policy. Still, to make up my own mind about this matter and build an understandable framework, I decided to make a small research. For that I studied some recent international discussions concerning the problem and tried to make a comparison between some countries. The limits of my work are set by the availability of information, due to the fact that these discussions are reasonably recent and many countries have yet not reached the point of seriously trying to apply democratic decision-making in the heritage field. I have used material which was available in the internet together with my own previous experience and inquiries concerning the matter. The outcome of this research should be a formed opinion by the author which hopefully will also be of use to someone else.

Denkmalpflegdiskussion in Germany

In the year 2000 discussion about practices and principles of state heritage management in Germany triggered. So called *Denkmalpflegdiskussion* concentrated on the question if heritage policy should become decentralized (*entstaatlicht*) and decision-making process given to the public and other stakeholders. Or if at least, state shouldn't execute the laws on the heritage, which are not accepted by the local population. Decentralization supporters, led by a critic Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm, had a romantic view in the matter, arguing that monuments should affect public's emotions rather than be an academic decision about historical values. (HOLTORF 2007)

Professionals vs people?

Indeed, authoritarian and somewhat patronizing heritage management system where state officials and field professionals are the ones who decide what and how should be preserved, excludes common people from decision-making process and therefore may become a kind of hobby for a small group of elite. However, protected objects are used by people and belong to their life-environment. Keeping those buildings in good condition would be much easier in

cooperation with the community. Also, selection of valuable objects would be more variable if people with different background and education could contribute to it. On the other hand, in every field of study, professionals are needed to have wider overview and deeper knowledge of the subject. It is a common fact that not everybody can be an engineer, doctor or chemist—why should heritage field be any different? The problem here is similar to obstacles encountered in other humanitarian sciences in general, including arts and history. Already in the 1960s, pop art raised a question about “high” and “low” art and who should decide what is art and what is not. Similarly, in history-writing there has been a turn to more democratic histories, where common people with average life, or even minorities, can be the subject of study, instead of the stories of “white men committing terror acts”, which is usually the case in traditional political history. Maybe it would also be possible just to reform professional heritage field from inside by widening the options of selecting the monuments, for example giving the voice to some subcultures which are being today suppressed? Would this be enough to bring monuments closer to public?

At least according to Mr Hoffmann-Axthelm and his followers it’s not enough by far. For them the problem is not only in the interpretation. One of the crucial questions lies in the change of ownership—although many buildings have gone to the private hands, they still are managed by the laws which were created in the time of collective property, i.e. absolutist period. Radically democratic viewpoint sees people inhabiting and owning ancient buildings as the ones to decide how much old material to preserve in their house.

They also argue that decisions concerning cultural heritage may be politically or even academically tilted (different schools) as well as influenced by the business and money. The result of this kind of biased decisions is that ordinary citizens who don’t possess much political or financial power must carry all the costs. If we agree that civil servants applying the rules for cultural heritage objects can be subjective in their assessments and impose requirements incomprehensible for clients then what becomes of the democracy where people were supposed to rule? (HOTORF 2007)

Some of the suggestions of the “new heritage” supporters in Germany with comments:

- Open, taboo-free and comprehensible dialogue between the people and officials about the heritage preservation should take place.

Any kind of discussion would definitely add to mutual understanding and there may also come up some compromises which otherwise would seem impossible. But the question remains: how exactly should this dialogue happen? On the local or state level?

- Heritage list should be reassessed in every 10 years for every generation to be accountable for protected buildings.

It seems reasonable that the list should in some intervals be overlooked, but there still has to be some kind of continuity in the policy of preserving. Even if the selection is somewhat tilted politically or academically, it'll be a sign of the preferences of the time they were added to the list, which will be informative to the future generations on their own. Adding some buildings in 10 years is understandable because generations and tastes change but we shouldn't eliminate the objects from the list which are not "in fashion" any more because in that way we only preserve to ourselves and not to the future generations who might have totally different taste.

- The number of buildings protected by the state is too high and should be reduced. This doesn't mean that buildings could not be preserved by some other public initiatives: NGOs, owners of the buildings etc.

In most cases overlooking the heritage list could be beneficial because of maybe too many buildings of the same kind. In the listing of monuments by the state there should be a principle: to preserve as much as necessary but as few as possible. This would guarantee the better overview as well as capacity to take care of the monuments. In this case definitely the public initiative should be encouraged to form private funds and collectives for preserving buildings which have rather local than state-wide value.

- The principle for choosing the buildings to national heritage list should be its esthetical appeal which must be comprehensible to anybody. For that reason selection should be made by the public, not academic professionals. "What does not move any hearts – why should it be saved" takes into account the conscience of common people.

This opinion seems to be very contradictory. First, you can not make all the peoples' "heart to move" in the first place. There are people who are interested in the cultural values and the ones who are not. Secondly, bigger esthetical enjoyment usually comes with bigger knowledge. If we exclude from our target group the people of bigger knowledge, we would discourage study of history and culture in general. On the other hand, I agree that the opinions of "people from the street" shouldn't be patronized and ignored completely. Also, educating the people would be a great contributor of better understanding the heritage.

- Old buildings are more beautiful. New architecture was built to last for the short period of time anyway. Therefore we shouldn't preserve them now.

This rejection of post-war architecture may be due to the fact that people feel uncomfortable about the time period after WWII when cold modernization and worship of technology took over, accompanied by the unacceptable political regimes in many countries. The concept of beauty changes in time. Medieval art and architecture was not considered beautiful for many centuries. If those objects would have been demolished then, we would not have many romantic castles and churches much appreciated by the average tourists nowadays. Also, if we would agree with the concept of new houses being built for the short period only, we should exclude a vast majority of old buildings as well, for their "expiring date" has exceeded the time of knights and kings for whom these buildings have been erected.

Indeed, majority of people tend to value old architecture more. This is illustrated by the Dresden Neumarkt area example where citizens' initiative led to a reconstructive interpretation instead of professionals' proposition to use new architecture (HOLTORF 2007). When power is given to the people, professionals have to accept the possibility of maybe not so "sophisticated" choices of preservation being executed. But it can be worth it if we consider the pride and enthusiasm people will feel about their city afterwards. Heritage forms a large part of peoples' identity and should therefore be created considering their needs.

The one fact Hoffmann-Axthelm seems to forget is that so called "ordinary citizens" are hardly ever objective in their preferences as well. Most of the owners of the house would definitely prefer to keep the costs of restoration as low as possible. Also esthetically, there are different viewpoints on the post-war heritage which is not yet accepted by the wider audience. But should the minority with more modern taste then be ignored? Seems rather undemocratic.

Image crisis of heritage preservation

The cultural heritage preservation in many countries seems to go through something we could call "image crisis". Public doesn't trust the authorities' abilities and judgement. Also, they haven't been successful in communicating the purpose of their existence. *In everyday life in Germany, heritage smacks of non-sellers, sleeve protectors, and 19th century. The relevant state authorities are seen as the nasty heritage police bothering house owners unnecessarily*

and preventing industrial development and economic growth by increasing construction costs. This negative image is beautifully expressed by the following graffiti:

”Gott schütze uns vor Staub und Schmutz,

vor Feuer, Krieg, und Denkmalschutz”. (HOLTORF 2007)

This situation is partly created by the fact that in protection of monuments private and collective interests collide. But the image of heritage professionals could definitely be improved also by communicating comprehensibly to the public why something is saved. Sometimes also a problem may occur that specialists themselves don't know exactly the reasons because of the undefined assessment criteria and vacuous concepts.

Agenda Kulturarv in Sweden

Operation Heritage project “Putting people first” (2001–2003) in Sweden set its goal to renew the heritage sector according to the needs of contemporary sustainable society. The purpose was put as to *reinvigorate the direction, democratic legitimacy and effectiveness of heritage management*. “Sustainable”, “multicultural”, “democratic” are the words which appear repeatedly in the statement and the link between historic environment and sustainable development is accentuated. The statement also stresses the need to raise public's awareness in the matter and encourage their involvement. Dialogue, cooperation with the public as well as with other colleagues and universities should be promoted. (Agenda Kulturarv 2004)

In sum, the statement formulates generally all the trendy keywords for modern society, but that's all it does. The question remains – how should the involvement of people actually take place? Who would have the final word in the matters of heritage preservation? It seems that sometimes public involvement can just be a politically correct attitude towards any kind of management. In real life it means that the public is enlightened by the authorities about the “correct” way of interpreting heritage without actually participating in the decision-making process.

Educate or involve?

To find a balance in the public participation issue, we have to ask, how far are we willing to go in decentralization of heritage management? Moderate approach would educate the public by promoting and introducing the viewpoints of already existing heritage interpretation. Latter meaning both, the concept of preservation and practical restoration methods, for example explaining why we preserve something and how we should do it. The benefit of it being that wider audience will hopefully start to see value of old buildings in general and would become more

obedient in preserving it. In result people can even collectively organize to maintain or promote certain heritage objects themselves. One example is yearly organized work-day in the spring to clean up neglected cemeteries, ruins etc. in Estonia, being held by the initiative of civil society volunteers¹

However, this is not tangible democratization. In the case of public involvement, people must have actual political power to make a change. They must also be involved in decision-making process. Although in democratic countries everybody can make a suggestion to take some object under protection, the final decision is usually made by the experts. If we want to make a turn towards public-run heritage management, we need to give the public a voice. How much would public's vote count, is a matter of discussion.

In New Zealand a pilot project of participatory approach to assessment of heritage was carried out in 2000. It was an attempt to include different ethnic and cultural groups to the selection process. In this alternative way of evaluating heritage the expert goes from being a controller to facilitator and negotiator. However, people who turned up tended to be with more cultural interests than average. (HARTFIELD, KINDON 2003) Although we can argue that maybe through different advertising methods we could end up having wider range of society, we cannot change the fact that we can only attract people who are interested in the heritage in the first place. Also, heritage specialist in this case is a contact person and initiator for people to take action themselves. The process is time-consuming, which may require additional personnel for Heritage Board who would specialize on communication. Considering that the heritage field hardly in any country gets enough financial support from the government, this might become a problem.

Tiered system of Australia

In Australia there exists a three level system for cultural heritage preservation: national, state and local level. Public discussion has more weight as we move from national level towards local level. In 2006 a review of the policy of Australian historic conservation was carried out by Productivity Commission². This triggered a discussion about problems and shortcomings in the field. Main disappointment was considered to be the failure of Integrated National Heritage Policy framework, meaning that different levels of heritage system were not cooperating. Also the communication is made difficult by the vague concepts of assess and

¹ <http://www.minueesti.ee/?&lng=en>

² Productivity Commission is an independent statutory authority and the Australian government's principal review and advisory body on microeconomic policy and regulation

significance in heritage conservation. This is an impediment to make heritage to integrate into other planning systems. Whether there exists a dialogue between heritage people and citizens often depends on the individual cases, taking into account that the laws of different states are slightly different. As the assessment often mimics the examples of previous nominations, the selection of objects tends to reflect the preferences of authorities with special training. In addition, Australia is an example of strong democracy turning against itself: those who have the loudest voice and political influence win the game. However, the tiered system of heritage preservation seems to be more local citizen friendly. By starting from the suggestions on the local level the heritage objects may at least in theory move finally even to national level, although with each step the process becomes more centralized. (LUSH 2008)

A recent on-line survey among citizens of Australia and New Zealand shows that over 90% agreed that heritage is part of local identity, that it's important to educate children about heritage and that it's important to protect heritage places even if I may never visit them (LUSH 2008). For sure we can widen these results to most of the other countries as well. Heritage is part of peoples' conscience and even if they themselves are not particularly interested in it, they feel the need and responsibility to protect it. This doesn't automatically mean that everybody would like to participate in the decision-making process – many people probably would prefer to have somebody make the decisions for them. Participating in the heritage management is and will probably remain the passion for the specific interest group. This doesn't mean that we shouldn't give the chance to as many people as possible.

Social benefit vs private property

In capitalist societies there occurs the tension between heritage as social benefit which also happens to be private property. How to solve the everlasting problem that built heritage is materially in private hands but mentally collectively owned?

Recommendation by the Productivity Commission of Australia stressed out the need for improving the extent of data and methodologies about heritage listing benefits and costs. The main problem is how to translate qualitative value into quantitative one so that heritage could have tangible value in economic terms. (LUSH, 2008)

Somehow it is important to make the private and collective interests to coincide. This can be possible in a close community.

A concept of community is in the matters of public involvement a crucial question. Initiative always starts at the community level. Sense of communion rises from similar values. Can these values be created?

New World in Estonia

An example from Estonia: in recent years there has been an “awakening” amongst the inhabitants of the wood-architecture suburbs characteristic to some Estonian towns. The housing there dates back to the first half of the 20th century. Originally these buildings had stove heating and were inhabited by the workers and other common people. Today many young educated and environment-conscious people have moved to these suburbs because of the healthy and nature-close surrounding. Sometimes this requires adapting with the specific conditions (stove heating, natural ventilation in the buildings). Sometimes also renewal is needed (modern washing conditions etc). People living in those areas have started to form societies which have their own festivals, fares, cultural events and other activities. Some of the most active ones are New World society (Uue-Maailma Selts)³ in Tallinn, Supilinna Selts (Soup Town Society) in Tartu, Karlova Society in Tartu and others. Those societies are all strongly connected with the restoration centers which give out information about renovation of old houses. These areas are rapidly reforming the areas’ identity and are good examples of the heritage “moving hearts”. Revitalizing of these areas happened when there was critical amount of people feeling the same way. Now they are making the lobby-work needed to get even more people moving to these areas. These districts are being protected only in local municipality level as “milieu-valuable building areas”⁴

This kind of communities are probably the best way to preserve what is important to the local people and even stand against aggressive developers not to mention the addition to the attractiveness of the place. Being now appreciated as human friendly and healthy housing, they weren’t held in favor for decades. For these buildings not to be demolished there had to be an obstacle, which in Estonia’s case was poverty. Today as demolishing an old house and

³ <http://www.uusmaailm.ee/>

⁴ <http://www.miljooala.ee/?id=831>

building a new one can be cheaper than restoration we need some other obstacle, be that heritage protection or local community initiative.

To answer the question posed by Dieter Hoffmann-Axthelm if heritage which doesn't move any hearts should be preserved there could also be this answer: as the heritage which moves the hearts of people is able to survive even without governmental support, maybe houses which are not appreciated by the majority of public should need even extra care! We don't know which will be the values of future generations therefore we have no right to eliminate some architectural styles for good just because most of the people today cannot appreciate them. That is why centralized protection of these buildings is required – for to protect the heritage which doesn't yet move most of the peoples' heart.

Conclusion

Thus: to what extent is democratization of built heritage management possible and desirable? Firstly, the possibility of absolute democratization is limited because of the mere reason that not all people are interested in the heritage. This inevitably already assigns the target group as people more than average interested in cultural matters. Also, it seems to me that possibility of having a fruitful dialogue with common people can only be carried out in local level.

One possibility to keep people more involved is to make a distinction between national and local monuments. National level requires a thorough overview and clear concept in preserving and should be led by the experts. This doesn't mean that these monuments shouldn't be overlooked in some intervals. Also, including people from different educational and social background to the assessment process could be beneficial. In general, the amount of the monuments on that level should be governed by the rule: as much as necessary but as less as possible. The other, local level of monument preservation should be given to the hands of people. On this level people could initiate a process of taking something under protection at first as a monument of local importance. The preservation requirements for these buildings should also be in most part left for the citizens to decide.

The desirability of democratization could be concluded in that way: as long as it doesn't turn against itself. If a democratization starts to ignore the experts whose opinion has been formed by research and study of the field, the discipline of heritage starts to discriminate itself and is

therefore undemocratic. Also, if we start to assess buildings only by contemporary fashion which right now moves peoples' hearts, then we discriminate future generations to come who might be in different opinion and this would be undemocratic.

Fortunately, if something really moves the hearts of people, no horde of public servants can ignore it. And this applies to all countries and policies.

Referencies

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