

Heritage futures: A conversation

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Abstract

Purpose – This article explores the concept of “heritage futures”, the role of heritage in managing relations between present and future societies. It assesses how thinking strategically about the future changes, complicates and contextualises practices of heritage. What might an attention to the future bring to work in heritage, and simultaneously, what challenges—both practical and ethical—arise?

Design/methodology/approach – This article takes the form of a conversation about the nature of heritage futures and how such a project may be implemented in both heritage practice and field research in heritage studies. The two authors are heritage scholars who integrate heritage futures questions into their research in different ways, and their conversation uncovers potentialities and difficulties in the heritage futures project.

Findings – The discussion covers the particular ethical issues that arise when the dimension of time is added to heritage research and practice, including questions of continuism, presentism and specificity. The conversation argues for the importance of considering the future in heritage studies and heritage practice and that this forms a key part of understanding how heritage may be part of building a sustainable present and future.

Originality/value – The future is an under-examined concept within heritage studies, even as heritage is often framed as something to be preserved “for future generations”. But what impact might it have on heritage practice to really consider what this means, beyond the platitude? This article suggests that heritage scholars and practitioners direct their attention to this often-neglected facet of heritage.

Keywords Heritage futures, Heritage management, Sustainability, Continuism, Presentism, Universality, Ethics, Temporality, Implementation, Change, Resilience, Conservation

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

In Rwanda’s Ethnographic Museum, I am speaking with a man who works in the Rwandan heritage sector about *nyakatsi*, grass-thatched houses. This form of vernacular architecture has largely vanished from Rwanda as the result of both development and deliberate destruction: a government initiative called Bye-Bye Nyakatsi has targeted them for replacement with concrete homes. Most Rwandans live in houses with metal or tile roofs now, and nyakatsi are few and far between. Asking about this, I assume that my interlocutor will lament the disappearance of nyakatsi and the remaking of Rwanda’s built landscape in a new architectural model of sanitised modernity.

But my interlocutor does not have much affection for nyakatsi—and his argument for their removal is actually heritage-based. Cultural heritage, he says, “is what people think is useful to represent their identity. To help them remember what happened in the past and help them organize the present and shape the future”. This is why he thinks nyakatsi can and should be replaced. He says that they are unsafe, unsanitary and unsuitable: “The future of Rwandans should not be shaped within those kinds of houses”. Nyakatsi are “part of our past, but a past which can’t fit in the future we want” (Bolin, 2019, p. 175).



I should not be surprised that he says this. Working in and on Rwanda for years, I have seen a country hurtling headlong into the future. Development moves fast here; in the capital, a restaurant is operating one day, and the next a new road has been routed where it used to stand. The heritage sector in Rwanda is less about a nostalgic preservation than it is about the clear-eyed selection, and creation, of those aspects of the past which are useful to the present—and, as my interlocutor notes, to the future.

After our interview, I do not think too deeply about that word—future—until a few years later, when I join the UNESCO Chair on Heritage Futures at Linnaeus University (LNU). Here, I start trying to find ways to think more systematically, and strategically, about heritage and the future. In fact, the future has been everywhere in my research, but I have so far failed to rigorously interrogate it. I've been more interested in thinking of heritage as “the past in the present”, how we construct and utilise the past for our own purposes today. In this, my research draws on work in heritage studies which focuses on our contemporary uses of heritage and how these dynamics raise questions about, for example, who wields power in heritage-making, to what ends heritage is mobilised, and how to pursue more equitable forms of practice (e.g. [Harrison, 2013](#); [Meskell and Pels, 2005](#); [Colwell and Ferguson, 2008](#); [Atalay, 2012](#); [Hamilakis and Duke, 2007](#); [Smith, 2006](#)).

But what if, like my interlocutor from Rwanda, I examined heritage through the lens of the future—whatever that might look like, and however we might affect it? Where might this lead us in tandem with extant priorities in critical heritage work—those questions about politics, ethics and the practice of heritage—but adding another temporal layer, another set of stakeholders and topics, to our concerns?

These are questions that Cornelius Holtorf, holder of the UNESCO Chair at LNU and the driving force behind the university's research and education on heritage futures, has long considered. The author of numerous articles and contributions to several books on heritage futures ([Harrison *et al.*, 2020](#); [Holtorf and Högberg, 2021a](#)), he has undertaken research on future-oriented questions such as how heritage studies can inform the safe disposal of nuclear waste for thousands of years from now.

In the following conversation, we discuss what “heritage futures” means, how to implement it in research and in the professional heritage sector, and the social context of the work. The concept of the future in heritage is worthy of a systematic investigation, and of being integrated into active research and heritage practice. At the same time, it is not an unproblematic idea, and our conversation also covers some of the ethical issues that confront it, from presentism and continuism to universality.

Annalisa Bolin (hereinafter “AB”): What do you mean when you talk about heritage futures, and why is this something that you think is necessary for those of us in heritage studies to consider? Where did the term come from?

Cornelius Holtorf (hereinafter “CH”): Heritage futures are concerned with the roles of heritage in managing the relations between present and future societies, e.g. through anticipation, planning and prefiguration. Heritage futures are thus about perceptions of the future and how they inform what we do with heritage today. The term grew out of the initial discussions we had about the interrelations between cultural heritage and the future about a decade ago and was first used by us at that time ([Holtorf and Högberg, 2013](#)).

The concern with “heritage futures” came about from the observation that even though it is a commonplace in heritage policy and heritage management to state that it is necessary to safeguard and preserve the heritage not only for living people's benefits but also for the benefit of future generations, not very many have actually considered what that means ([Högberg *et al.*, 2017](#)). I have yet to meet anybody who could specify which future generations we preserve any heritage for or who had ever heard anybody addressing that question at some depth and in a professional context. Instead, the intention is usually that the heritage

should be preserved for as long as possible. This implies an assumption that the values and benefits of heritage are timeless and will not change over time. But just like the heritage sector has learned to appreciate that there are different understandings, values and benefits of heritage across space, the same is the case in relation to time. It is not difficult to look back at the history of heritage and find that its understandings, values and benefits have changed quite a bit over the last few centuries. There is no reason to assume that from now on everything will broadly stay the same.

Whereas Fabian (2002) critiqued assumptions about a timeless Other in relation to the past, I would like to critique assumptions about a timeless Same in relation to the future. In the words of tourism scholar Catherine Cameron (2010, p. 203), “[i]t is logical to project that heritage and its manufacture may wane or change as new social and cultural conditions unfold in the future”. Similarly, architect Paolo Ceccarelli (2017, p. 6) noted that “to correctly conserve the past we need to anticipate the future. And this may imply transformation. How can we expect to establish correct rules for conserving heritage without taking into consideration the substantial changes that are taking place in the way people relate to reality and perceive it?” It is therefore high time for the heritage sector to start thinking seriously about heritage futures (Harrison *et al.*, 2020; Holtorf and Högberg, 2021a).

AB: Why do you think the future has become simultaneously so rhetorically powerful—as with the rise of sustainable development rhetoric, which talks about meeting the present’s needs without endangering the capacity of future generations to meet their own needs—and yet in the heritage sector, you have found, as you said, that people can’t specify much about the future for which they’re preserving heritage? Where does this gap come from?

CH: I am wondering myself. A concern with the interests and needs of future generations has been very palpable in society since at least the 1970s. This was the time when the environmental movement gained momentum by pointing to the long-term risks of ongoing resource exploitation and environmental destruction, and in particular to the liabilities associated with nuclear power. This was also when the Club of Rome (1972) warned of the limits of growth and the risks of a continued human exploitation of the Earth, which eventually led to the current concern with sustainability. Even “strategic foresight” emerged at that time. Governments and corporations adopted forecasting and began simulating future circumstances, often using scenarios, for the purposes of planning and adapting in relation to various possible futures (Sandford and Cassar, 2021). In one sense, this was matched by UNESCO adopting the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage (1972), motivated by the realisation that cultural and natural heritage is “increasingly threatened with destruction” and in need of being safeguarded for the future. But what was not considered was that the values and benefits of heritage are not inherent and timeless, in the way that access to key resources, functioning eco-systems and human health are, but instead they are highly variable.

One reason for this oversight may have been the lack of dialogue between heritage management and heritage studies on the one hand and strategic foresight and futures studies on the other hand (Sandford and Cassar, 2021). More generally, maybe one could go as far as suggesting that there is a certain lack of appreciation for cultural dynamics in large parts of society, while at the same time the cultural sector is often concerned with values and practices that seem timeless. For many, culture is mostly about “the arts” and something that follows its own logic and is best enjoyed for its own sake. The significance of specific cultural meanings, values and norms for understanding (and influencing) human behaviour more generally, is not sufficiently recognised in politics. No wonder that “cultural sustainability” has been excluded from Agenda 2030 as a fourth pillar besides environmental, economic and social sustainability, and that UNESCO’s ambitions to make culture more prominent proved (and prove) to be an uphill struggle (Labadi, 2020; see also <http://culture2030goal.net>).

AB: As someone working within heritage studies who wants to consider the issue of heritage futures, one of the main challenges I've encountered is implementation. I want to talk first about how heritage futures thinking can be implemented in academic research, and later about implementation in practice.

For my field research agenda, I'm interested in how a futures-oriented framework might be actively applied within that project, but I am still figuring out how to do this. First, I have started asking people about their visions of the future, to get at their own processes of future thinking. This is perhaps less future thinking on my part than it is just incorporating the question into my own standard ethnographic interview practice. Sometimes responses are meaningful, but at other times they seem constrained by presentism, a topic I'll raise with you later.

Second, I've tried to engage in a kind of forecasting by outlining the possibilities that are opened up in a particular case—the repatriation of a collection from Germany to Rwanda. This is somewhat speculative, in that my work on this outlines what possibilities this repatriation enables, and to some extent, I'm sticking my neck out by saying things that the passage of time might overturn with a thud. But it's also grounded in my long engagement with Rwandan heritage politics and my understanding of the context, and so I have a good grasp on the dynamics that are going to shape the post-repatriation possibilities—they are both longstanding and ongoing. And it's worthwhile to consider what happens after repatriation, where repatriation is a hub of new possibilities.

But is this really an example of instituting future thinking in research? Is my first example, incorporating the future into my interviews, a dodge or a cop-out? How might we implement a futures-oriented research agenda?

CH: In the context of repatriation of a certain collection of cultural heritage from Germany to Rwanda, your concern with what will happen after repatriation is important and very appropriate. Asking decision-makers about their perceptions and assumptions about the future is not a cop-out but a very significant question to pose. In line with what we found when we started our research on heritage futures by asking heritage managers what future(s) they were working for (Högberg *et al.*, 2017), I expect that within your context this question has not often been asked either. Presumably, the assumption being made is that the act of return will be appreciated for all time and that the heritage will invariably benefit future generations in Rwanda. But these things are subject to change, especially when you think decades or even centuries ahead (which is what the term “future generations” implies). Will there be states of Rwanda and Germany in, say, two hundred years from now? Will there be “cultural heritage” in the way we use the term today? One important way of implementing futures thinking is to ask what assumptions about the future are being made, compare the answers with what we today can know about the future, what alternative futures are conceivable and possibly preferable, and then assess how heritage management may be able to benefit future generations in the best possible way.

I would dispute your claim that anything people may anticipate for the future is speculative and might be overturned “with a thud”. I agree that nobody can foresee the exact behaviour of any individual or any particular event that could happen. But at a larger scale there are processes in motion that do not change very quickly and drastically (more on this below). It is a legitimate concern of research to discern reasonable anticipations for specific futures in Rwanda and begin a process of considering the possible roles of the returned collection, and of cultural heritage more generally, in any of these futures. To put it bluntly, 8 billion years from now, when the Earth is projected to have been swallowed by the Sun, it most definitely will not matter where any heritage collections are kept and how they may or may not benefit anybody in what today is Rwanda or some other country. So for how long *does* all this matter, in what way, and what does it depend on? Behind this lies a genuine concern for the wellbeing of future generations, knowing that the overwhelming number of human beings that will ever exist are very likely going to be living in the future (Figure 1).

AB: My second set of implementation questions has to do with having an effect on practice. Your work with the UNESCO Chair aims to “build global capacity for futures thinking among heritage professionals”. What does it mean to actively plan for the future with regard to heritage?

In terms of actual implementation, there is the issue of “presentism”, the idea that we are cognitively biased toward the present in ways that limit our ability to envision a future that differs from what we are experiencing now. This forecloses our vision and creativity; it’s also inaccurate, since unexpected things—which are by definition difficult to predict—occur all the time. But there are also continuities between present and future: trends, e.g. demographic changes, that are happening now, can be projected into the future, and are likely to proceed in forecasted ways. In practical terms, how do we adjust heritage practices to a future that differs from the present and is also uncertain in some ways? How might we escape presentism in order to have the capacity to think imaginatively about the future?

CH: Implementation and impact on practice are crucial for any theorising. There are considerable challenges for heritage management in any aspiration to avoid presentism and explicitly aim at achieving distinct benefits for specific future generations. Three possible strategies focus on: (1) acknowledging temporal specificity in decision-making, (2) capacity-building for decision-makers regarding discernible trends for probable futures and desirable principles of future governance and (3) representing proxies for future generations in decision-making processes.

Concerning acknowledging temporal specificity in decision-making, this could mean that more decisions expire at specific points in the future. After all, as Rodney Harrison (2012, p. 587) put it, “if we are to maintain that heritage is not universal, as seems to be agreed by many contemporary heritage practitioners, then it requires regular revision and review to see if it continues to meet the needs of contemporary and future societies”. Yet current regimes of heritage conservation, such as the 1972 World Heritage Convention, do not envisage much in the way of regular revision of the benefits of heritage to human societies and rather evoke a notion of eternity in relation to the “outstanding universal value” of inscribed world heritage sites. Given that the values of heritage sites and their appreciation by experts change over time, maybe decisions of inscription could expire—and thus require renewal of the list—in regular intervals. More generally, different heritage may be preserved across different

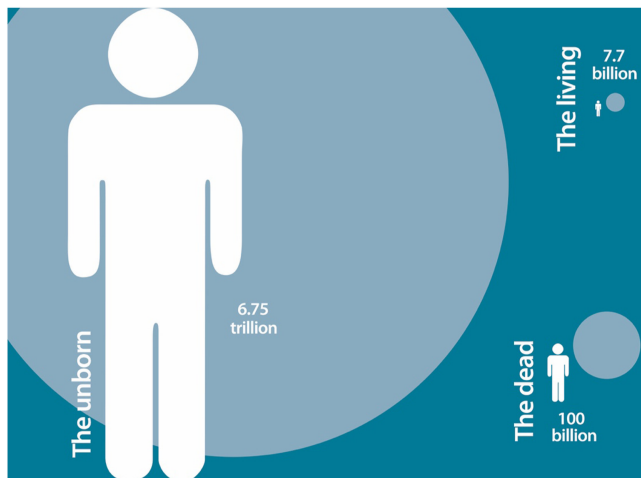


Figure 1.
The scale of unborn generations, projecting this century’s birth rate 50,000 years into the future. Data from Our World In Data/UN/Population Reference Bureau. Graphics by Jessica Bustamante, adapted from an original figure by Nigel Hawtin

timespans, for example for one or two generations (25–50 years). In that way, the heritage to be conserved would be regularly updated as perceptions and values of heritage change.

To mention a specific example, the UK *Good Practice Guide for Local Heritage Listing* (English Heritage, 2012) considered a regular review of the local heritage list in Stockport, UK, as “a good opportunity to reassess how [the list] could be used to recognize the contribution of locally significant heritage to the character of the town”, implying that both assessments of significance and the character of the town may change over time, with consequences to what may be selected as the most appropriate local heritage (Holtorf and Högberg, 2021c, pp. 266–267).

A second strategy is to learn more about what the future may hold by studying discernible trends. This means to do what is common in many other areas of society where long-term planning is important, e.g. urban planning, national defence, pension funds, forest management and nuclear waste disposal (Hansson *et al.*, 2016). Heritage management could work with scenarios and try to optimise strategies in relation to a variety of equally possible futures. The heritage sector could also become better at recognising discernible trends and consider their implications for maximising the benefits of heritage to specific future generations. There is pretty uncontroversial data available (e.g. at <https://ourworldindata.org>) that makes it possible to anticipate changes related to human demography and environmental conditions on Earth, for example. Incidentally, something similar applies to the past, where experts often struggle to know very much about individuals and their lives, whereas larger social, cultural, economic or environmental patterns can nonetheless be discerned. It is perhaps not so surprising that the longer we look ahead and the longer we look back the more general the picture becomes. At the farthest extremes, we know when and how the Earth came into being (ca. 4.5 billion years ago) and when and how it will cease to exist (ca 8 billion years from now), but we lack the same detail in our knowledge of the distant past and future that we can gain about periods very close to the present.

In cases when heritage experts may not be confident enough to identify specific trends or shared elements in several scenarios, e.g. because the future to be considered is very far ahead and too uncertain, they may still be able to create or optimise processes and principles of decision-making that are adjustable to specific future conditions. As my colleague Anders Högberg and I argued (Holtorf and Högberg, 2021b, p. 11), that could mean managers and policy-makers plan indirectly, by regulating systems of future governance. For example, they may agree on ideals of democracy and environmental awareness, installing a requirement to ensure local participation and environmental friendliness in any specific decision-making about heritage. Granted that these principles may lead to very different and unanticipated outcomes at different points in the future, and they are of course subject to subsequent modification (just like any other policy decision made in the present).

Finally, the heritage sector could accommodate the interests of future generations by involving their proxies in decision-making processes. One particularly promising way of doing this is based on strong external representation of future generations' interests (Otten, 2018). This method involves a form of role play where special advocates represent the anticipated interests of future generations, enjoying strong veto rights to prevent any harmful decisions. There are also other forms of role play that can help overcome political short-termism and increase the adoption of future-friendly policies. It has been demonstrated that when faced with formal representatives of future generations, more than double the number of decision-makers favour choices promoting sustainability than was otherwise the case (Kamijo *et al.*, 2017). Given that there are difficulties in identifying the best interests of future generations in each specific issue to be decided on, in deciding which specific future generations to represent in the first place, and what to do when different future groups of people or indeed different future generations may disagree with each other, this is not an easy fix to the problem at hand. But it could help to consider all these difficulties and sharpen the

heritage experts' sensitivity to presentism, in the same way that they have in recent decades become more sensitive to issues such as discrimination. That alone may improve on the current situation in the heritage sector where the specific interests and needs of future generations, especially insofar as they will differ from our own interests and needs in the present, are never much addressed.

These three strategies are mutually compatible with each other. They could all inform decision-making processes and thus help rendering heritage management more "future proof".

AB: The Chair does outreach, training and education directed at professionals in certain fields in order to bring an implementation roadmap to people with the power to make decisions and changes. When I came to the Chair, this strong focus on applied work contrasted with the self-consciously scholarly, critical context that framed my previous, US-based university, which was oriented toward academic publication and research audiences. It's not that the work of the Chair is not scholarly or critical, but rather that in some aspects it emphasises decision-makers and the non-academic heritage sector in terms of intended outcomes and audiences. What are you attempting to do with the Chair in terms of affecting the world and people's thinking?

CH: We are engaged in the bread-and-butter of university work, like teaching students, conducting original research, publishing in peer-reviewed journals, applying for external funding and carrying out public outreach. But some of the aims of the Chair may indeed set it apart from common aspirations in other academic contexts. Our main focus is on trying to make a difference in the world by collaborations with non-academic partners (like ICOMOS and UNESCO), with a particular emphasis on professional training and on policy-making. We use the term "applied cultural heritage" to describe our ambition to explore the potential of heritage to transform society (there is actually a Centre for Applied Heritage at Linnaeus University to which we contribute; see <https://lnu.se/en/research/searchresearch/centre-for-applied-heritage/>). Specifically, we try to establish in society the idea that heritage management requires skills in futures thinking (futures literacy) and we want to empower practitioners to implement such thinking in their work.

I think there are three different dimensions that can explain this particular aspiration. The first one is the very context of a UNESCO Chair. Such Chairs are not primarily Research Chairs. The purpose of the UNESCO Chairs, as described in the Programme's Guidelines, is "to address pressing challenges and contribute to the development of their societies". The Chairs function as "think tanks and bridge-builders between the academic world, civil society, local communities, research and policy-making" and contribute to UNESCO's priorities, in particular its efforts related to Agenda 2030 (UNESCO, 2017, pp. 3–4).

A second relevant aspect is the academic context in Sweden. There is no significant liberal arts tradition in Swedish education today, most university degree programmes have a strong vocational dimension, and considerable amounts of national research funding is ear-marked for priorities linked to political priorities. In this context, Linnaeus University's mission statement is not as surprising as it may be in other countries: "We set knowledge in motion for a sustainable societal development". In other words, our focus on applied research (in the humanities!) does not raise many eyebrows in Sweden. In fact, we received strong support for two other projects with strong applied dimensions: one is our Graduate School in Contract Archaeology (GRASCA) in which we provide research education for nine PhD students employed by five archaeological companies and supported by a major grant from The Knowledge Foundation supporting capacity development with the purpose of strengthening Sweden's competitiveness. The other project is a long-standing collaboration we have with the Swedish Nuclear Fuel and Waste Management Co. (SKB) and several other main stakeholders in the Swedish and international nuclear waste sector, with the intention to

enhance their work with long-term memory concerning geological repositories of nuclear waste (see several chapters in [Holtorf and Högberg, 2021a](#)).

The final relevant dimension is my personal interest. Ever since my student days some 30 years ago, I have been very interested in the meanings, uses and potential benefits of archaeology and cultural heritage in contemporary society. Critical thinking, writing skills and other intellectual abilities are most crucial when applied to real-world issues in the present. I have always been interested in the interface between archaeology, cultural heritage and contemporary society, aspired to come up with concrete implications (difficult as this is!), and gone out of my way to establish collaborations with non-academic partners, from the local museum in Kalmar to UNESCO (see, e.g. [Harrison et al., 2020](#)). The academic context in Sweden and the context of the UNESCO Chair allowed me to indulge in these interests far more than I ever thought I could when I started out during the 1980s, as a high-school student helping out on excavations in southern Germany.

AB: There is a lot of uncertainty about the future, but as you said earlier, it may not be necessary to concretely predict what will happen, but rather to put into place systems that allow adaptability and to cultivate resilience. How do you think heritage itself, or heritage studies, can actively contribute to this?

This also raises for me, though, a question about the value of looking to the future if what we need is instead resilience and adaptability. These skills serve us in the present, and do not really require that we have a future-oriented outlook in order to develop them. Research on resilience which involves heritage has actually looked backwards to examine how people cope with contexts of disaster and dramatic change as guidance for the present, such as looking to the African past in the context of COVID-19 for lessons on managing pandemics ([Chirikure, 2020](#)). So is there anything particularly “heritage futures” about this idea?

CH: Yes, one important way in which heritage can help us prepare for the future is by enhancing our ability to deal with unexpected events, e.g. as a result of disasters. Events and processes which human beings cannot anticipate or affect directly are best dealt with through resilience and adaptability. The link to “heritage futures” is in the particular contribution heritage can make to disaster risk reduction and risk preparedness which is an area of policy that seeks to identify, assess and reduce the risks of disaster in the future, among others by minimising vulnerabilities. I argued ([Holtorf, 2018](#)) that one of the main cultural strategies to reduce vulnerability is often misconceived. That strategy aims at protecting and conserving cultural heritage in order to strengthen a community’s collective identity and self-confidence, providing psycho-social support to its members in the event of disaster, i.e. when they need it most. However, as we have seen in many recent conflicts, including the wars in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria, this strategy of enhancing collective identities through cultural heritage often intensifies conflicts. Essentialising cultural heritage and linking it firmly to a community’s identity makes that community not only more vulnerable as and when cultural heritage becomes exposed to risks of loss, but destruction that occurs deliberately may also raise the stakes and contribute to fuelling ongoing conflicts, and thus create more disaster, not less. A better strategy is therefore to emphasise and increase the capability of communities and cultural heritage to absorb adversity. The story told by heritage is not necessarily about ancestral wisdom, cultural continuity and conservation, but at least as much about continuous adaptation, transformation and change over time. Promoting this story through appropriate policies facilitating change could lessen psycho-social dependencies on continuity and enhance human capabilities to embrace uncertainty, enact people’s resourcefulness and accept the possibility of loss. Consequently, in the future, a community would be more resilient to disasters that cause dramatic transformation.

This strategy is “heritage futures” to the extent that it is based on an appreciation of the mutability of heritage values and benefits and on an anticipation—and aspiration—of change rather than continuity. The task of improving risk preparedness for the future does not necessarily lie in minimising or preventing loss, which eventually will occur in any case, but just as much in maximising the capability to embrace change and adapt to transformations (Boccardi, 2015).

AB: Let’s talk more about this notion of people and communities. If we see heritage not as a collection of inert objects but as a social and political process, created by and in relation to human societies, this directs our attention to ethical questions. In heritage management, for example, there are discussions about how to encourage participation in heritage or how communities have suffered alienation from heritage and seek to reclaim it, and these can be examined through an ethical lens.

What intersections might this have with the study of heritage futures? There is the question of whether we have an ethical obligation to future generations. The idea that we today must consider what we are leaving to the future is integrated into concepts like sustainability, which means finding ways to meet the needs of the present without compromising the future’s abilities to meet its own needs. When we think, as heritage scholars, about heritage as a sociopolitical phenomenon, should we be integrating temporality into our list of ethical concerns? What ramifications might that have for heritage studies?

CH: I agree that we have ethical responsibilities to people, no matter where or when in the present or future they live (see Figure 1). This, as you say, is one of the reasons why sustainable development is so important: it grapples with the rights and needs of present and future generations. It is very positive that, in recent years, global heritage policy has increasingly been integrated into the sustainable development discourse (e.g. Albert, 2015; Larsen and Logan, 2018; Labadi, 2020). Heritage futures are about understanding and developing the contribution of heritage to sustain humanity and human societies by increasing their capability to persist in the long term.

To some extent, this concern with people’s rights and needs in the near and distant future requires balancing the interests of living people with those of future generations, with the added difficulties that, at all times, human interests tend to be contested and that the longer we look ahead the more uncertain the exact future conditions are that will frame people’s lives and determine their needs. These difficulties do not relieve us from ethical obligations but they require that we address the apparent challenges as well as we can. In heritage management, we therefore have to ask questions like this: Is it ethically justifiable to take resources from important causes in the present, such as health care, education or social security, and invest them in long-term conservation that may not be appreciated very much by future generations and could even harm them, because we have not been doing our very best to figure out their needs? I think that there is a strong need for Heritage Studies and heritage policy-makers to engage more with questions like this one. This is one of the main points of our volume on *Cultural Heritage and the Future* (Holtorf and Högberg, 2021a).

Sometimes I hear the view expressed that heritage management should not be concerned with the future and focus on present needs instead (e.g. Henderson, 2020). A concern with the future may even be dismissed as a distraction from important contemporary causes and thus effectively support conservative and possibly right-wing agendas. In this vein, Laurajane Smith critiqued “a hegemonic discourse of heritage” that “promotes a certain set of Western elite cultural values” while undermining “alternative and subaltern ideas” about heritage by putting its primary attention on processes of selection and protection of heritage in order to pass its inherent value on to future generations (2006, p. 11). I agree that heritage does not have inherent value and that the primary focus should be on what heritage “does” as a set of social and cultural practices. But rejecting any significance of social and cultural practices in the future is just another form of presentism and the equivalent of dismissing the rights and

needs of future communities—as if the need to make development more sustainable wasn't significant and as if climate change, pandemics, economic crises and nuclear warfare were not real risks for future generations that heritage practices could help mitigate. I find it somewhat cynical when all these risks are put to one side in the name of certain preferences we may have for the present. At the end of the day, it is not a question of choosing *between* the rights and interests of present and future communities but of finding ways of considering them *both*.

AB: Let's go back to the issue of presentism, because I think it also intersects with this question about ethics. Valentine and Hassoun (2019) have argued, in the context of anthropology, that “the post-1989 urgency for an anthropology of the future—and concern over its neglect—presumes at least some continuity to history, time, politics, sociality, and environmental conditions prior to the challenges of an uncertain ‘now’ under transformation”. They suggest that continuism, a “desire for the continuity of common worlds”, ignores those whose worlds have been characterised not by continuity but by violent rupture, such as indigenous peoples under settler colonialism, and perpetuates the conditions that make certain people more comfortable. Continuism also overlaps with the idea of presentism in that these frames tend to not incorporate or anticipate radical change from the present to the future: they're a kind of small-c conservatism.

In heritage futures, by using present-day conditions to anticipate aspects of future conditions or even in trying to manage the relations between present and future societies, might we be ensuring a form of continuism? That is, by trying to incorporate the future into our thinking today, could we end up actually reinforcing the continuity of present conditions? And is this an ethical problem for heritage futures? This latter question I think of in terms of perpetuating present-day blind spots and power dynamics, or relying on visions of the world that are inflected by today's inequalities and forms of domination without leaving room for, or encouraging, these to change.

CH: I am not in favour of either continuism or presentism. With one crucial exception: it is a truism that the continuity of the human species lies in the human interest, building on the achievements, while keeping in check the flaws, that have become apparent in human history up until now. Incidentally, this is the point of all endeavours for sustainable development. No concern for the wellbeing of people that belong to any specific human “tribe” [1] can override the basic interests that all humans share. There is a serious risk of continuism in advocating for “tribal” futures too, ignoring their own imperfections. That makes such campaigns liable to the same criticism, only on a smaller scale. But my main point is a critique of playing out global interests against local interests: they are not opposed to each other but intertwined. Contrasting the future of humanity with that of particular human groups ignores that many global futures, including dramatic environmental change, deadly pandemics, intimidating prospects of economic crises, increasing social inequality and compromised human rights, matter to us all. This is not a call for more homogeneity and global control in the name of universal principles but for improving the very conditions that make heterogeneity and local self-determination possible.

Having said that, there is no denying that anticipation is difficult and that a risk of presentism persists at every corner along the way. Nobody has any privileged access to the future and could indicate the right way forward. But, rather than making us despair at the challenges of the task we face, heritage futures are premised on doing the best we can in making knowledgeable decisions that will contribute to making future presents with the wellbeing of humanity on the top of our mind. Arguably, we have an ethical duty to future generations that we will have done the best we could in considering their legitimate interests as we were able to anticipate them. The actual outcomes will not be perfect but they may be better than if we were not doing anything to escape the shackles of presentism. We will keep learning more along the way.

AB: This also raises issues of specificity in society. As Valentine and Hassoun point out, certain groups have very different pasts, some characterised by rupture and dramatic change; and in the

present different groups also live in different conditions. In heritage studies, there has been significant emphasis on “the local”: the specificities of each situation, and being responsive to different conditions rather than appealing to the allegedly “universal” (not least because the “universal” is shaped by power structures that privilege the privileged). We have seen, such as in the discussion about preservation, authenticity and UNESCO World Heritage (e.g. Labadi, 2010; Winter, 2014), critiques of allegedly universal systems as coming out of a particular Eurocentric background, a push toward more flexibility in these frameworks, and even their fragmentation into locally responsive forms. How might heritage futures benefit from such critiques of universality? Can we tailor this work to specific conditions, or to incorporate different communities’ ways of thinking about the future?

CH: Although the future we can anticipate is fairly general, I agree entirely that an emphasis on specific local conditions is important. That is where life happens. Any work somebody does needs to be tailored to the particular conditions and power structures that shape local situations. The critical discussions about some of the specific outcomes of the 1972 UNESCO World Heritage Convention are significant and have already contributed to improving its Operational Guidelines and various associated practices of implementation, even though more may have to be done. But a legitimate focus on scrutinising local effects of global policy is not the same as questioning universality generally. I am not attracted to throwing out human rights in the name of local self-determination. Indeed, I am very concerned of the local consequences if the UN system was to be relinquished. It may be necessary to recall the aims of the United Nations as laid out in its 1945 Charter, which starts with the following guiding statement:

WE THE PEOPLES OF THE United Nations DETERMINED

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and

to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and

to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom

Are these aims not worth working for? Despite the unfinished business that remains, we should also not forget the UN system’s achievements, not the least Agenda 2030, setting out an ambitious programme of improving global development, adopted by all (!) member states. It sometimes seems disingenuous when colleagues dismiss the UN system out of hand, knowing full well its purpose and successes. It is sometimes as if communities are meant to be left to their own devices concerning the major challenges that humanity as such is faced with. To what extent are global power structures, privileges and universal approaches inherently problematic even when they address the prospect and possible consequences of pandemics, climate change, global economic crises, military conflicts, environmental destruction, social discrimination, lawlessness and extreme poverty?

People may have different perceptions of the future in relation to their specific cultural and social context but that does not mean that all the futures imagined in the present are equally likely to come about or that local communities make their futures entirely by themselves. At the time of writing, during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, has humanity not learned an awful lot about the general need to listen to experts and to collaborate globally to make the best possible political decisions? These are needs that cannot be met by promoting the logic of local communities alone. I am not defending imperialism, despotism or decadence. Quite the opposite: with authority, privilege and universal aspirations come a large amount of

responsibility. Authorised discourses are not always right, but I fear that humanity as a whole could be worse off without them. Local perspectives should be heard and carefully considered by experts and decision-makers, as they will be able to inform decisions and determine how successful anything can be implemented under specific circumstances. In short, it is precisely because of ethical concerns for the wellbeing of humanity in all its various localities that we need to adopt some more general agendas too. Justice is about considering the rights of everybody equally. That requires us at times to transcend “the local” and the present.

Note

1. According to [Maalouf \(2012, pp. 2–3, 30\)](#), a tribal concept of identity reduces personal identity to one single affiliation, often based on a perceived religious, racial, ethnic or national essence that determines everybody’s fundamental allegiance for which it is worthwhile to fight—and to die.

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