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Debate 20: Patrimonio cultural y cambio climático
Textos provisionales [pre-prints]

How do you think climate change affects cultural heritage?

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This question should be posed in the future tense. There is climate change, there always has been, but other than some significant events, the major consequences of this are largely predictions.

In all aspects of life, we have to predict the most likely future in order to survive. We can use better and more scientific means but there can be and often has been a 'black swan' - a metaphor for a major unpredictable event. We predict a rapid major change in the climate founded in past human activity and many governments are attempting to modify future behaviour to mitigate this predicted change. As with all future predictions, however, there is always uncertainty. Heritage is not physical objects or traditions in themselves but what a community believes should represent a past that is significant to its identity. This is bound to change. Even now, there is a current and controversial process, in South America and elsewhere, that is reassessing those parts of their past with which they believe their countries should no longer identify.

All these are societal responses to climate change and heritage and it is less the change in climate itself that will affect heritage than how societies react to any pressure to modify or redefine it.

Climate change could be so severe and become such a moral imperative that any past activity connected to energy profligacy would become objects or activities with which we would no longer wish to identify. Despite their age, their ubiquity, recognition that they were a reflection of their time, all association with them could be censured. This would be similar to the way that anything or anybody which had any association with slavery, which has all these characteristics, is now deemed by many to be offensive. While we may think this to be unlikely, we can speculate on what this would mean for our built heritage.

Anything associated with activities such as coal mining or oil extraction and anything funded by these activities, would no longer be considered worthy to be heritage. The impact would be enormous. Many country houses in Britain, anything to do with the Getty Foundation, down to much that has survived from the industrial revolution, would merit indifference or worse.

An opposite outcome, also based on severe climatic outcomes, is that the consequences would be so extreme that social disruption and global disaster would turn communities in on themselves. Anything which reinforces identity and provides a memory of more favourable times and a particular locality would be held in special regard. The value of heritage would be enhanced and new or more recent aspects of the past could become heritage (as indeed happens all the time). This is more likely and would be an acceleration and extension of the current condition, where globalisation has to reinforced interest in locality and tradition.

A further outcome of extreme -and indeed projected- climate change is a demographic move from areas newly degraded by the loss of productive land or the rise in sea level, to areas with enhanced agricultural conditions or more amenable to settlement. This is already happening. If the places affected by desertion have a heritage value and are to survive as suitable places for occupation, possibly of a smaller size, viable economic conditions will have to be created and consideration given to demolition of buildings of no current or likely heritage value to consolidate the remaining or incoming population into buildings to be preserved. This will most likely require cultural change and political action. One consequence would be a reconsideration of how to adapt the surviving heritage.

There are current discussions on whether to and how to improve the resistance to energy loss when historic buildings continue to be occupied. This is already causing difficulties. External insulation, solar panels and double or triple glazing have all been put forward as solutions but their impact on the appearance of historic buildings can significantly alter their appearance, particularly when it is the record of the appearance and fabric of the building that validates its preservation as heritage. There are two potential responses to this.

The first is to take a more evolutionary, rather than preservationist view of heritage. Many buildings have been preserved at an arbitrary moment in their history, arresting a process of change that would have continued if there had been no legal action taken to arrest it. The problem with much recent modification to heritage buildings has been the unsympathetic nature of modern materials, the current anti-historical culture of mainstream architecture and the UNESCO Venice Charter principles, whereby additions have to be obvious and clearly 'modern'. A greater tolerance of sympathetic change, whereby the character of the building is maintained, would provide opportunities for increasing energy performance without destroying or compromising the memory-value of the original heritage.

The second is to recognise the energy saving already locked in the existing structures. Hundreds of years of continued use represent a significant energy saving in relation to even a modest replacement strategy. Currently, energy saving is measured in terms of savings in active energy input brought about by more efficiency in on-going energy loss. Nowhere in these calculations is there an agreed measure for the major significance of longevity and nowhere, even in the those that recognise the value of future longevity, is there any credit for retrospective energy saving.

While retrospective energy saving or an energy credit may be difficult to countenance with the concept of future action to moderate climate change, the principle that 'the greenest building is the one already built' is gaining in support. This principle will inevitably affect built heritage. We will most likely have to take a more critical and flexible view of adaptation and modification and hence the integrity of heritage and provide an appropriate architectural approach to change.



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