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Intangible Heritage



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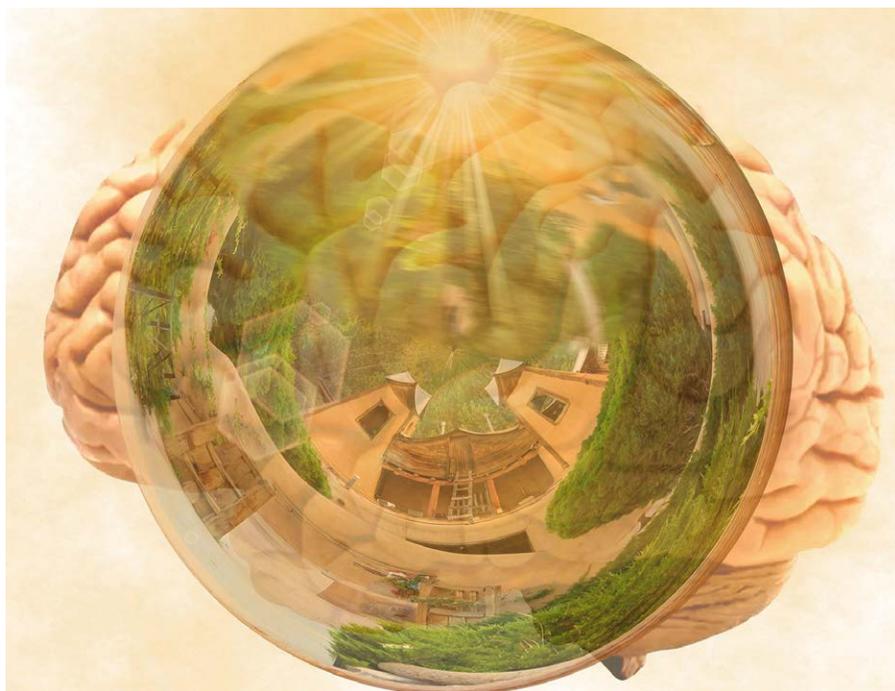
**Preservation
Leadership Forum**

Is There Such a Thing as Tangible Heritage?

JEREMY C. WELLS

Western culture over the past century has shown a remarkable interest in dystopian themes, especially those that contemplate the end of human existence. Fictional accounts in movies and books—such as *AI*, *War of the Worlds*, and *The Day the Earth Stood Still*—paint a predictably apocalyptic future, while more scientifically grounded works—such as *The World Without Us*, written by Alan Weisman, a professor and journalist—objectively help us understand how life on the planet will likely continue, regardless of our presence on it.¹ I provide this important context because I want to build on Weisman’s book title and ask what would “heritage” be in a “world without us”? Framing heritage in this way is a useful device to understand not only what this word means, but to also expose the haphazard and confused ways in which “heritage” is combined with “tangible” and “intangible” by educated people in the field of historic preservation. If we want to effectively communicate the value of “heritage” to the broader swath of humanity, surely we must first agree, among ourselves, what this concept is supposed to represent.

But back to my question. Let’s assume that tomorrow humanity ceases to exist. What remains? Certainly the tangible aspects of our environment will still be here, such as buildings and landscapes. The basic characteristics of these objects—such as color, length, height, design, and materials—would not disappear. The records of who designed these places and of past human events would also still exist, preserved and recorded in documents until those crumble into dust. It is therefore quite obvious that human-modified objects and records do not need human beings to continue to exist, at least for a time. An alien could visit an Earth without people and find examples of all of the characteristics that are traditionally associated with criteria A, B, C, and D of a National Register nomination. Or in another sense, the way in which we professionally



Heritage, as a concept, is inherently intangible.

ILLUSTRATION BY JEREMY C. WELLS

define historical significance within a regulatory framework doesn't actually need people to be operationalized. Given sufficient artificial intelligence, computers could be just as (or more) efficient in algorithmically defining historical significance—no people needed at all. Or maybe an alien race would be so inclined to populate our post-apocalyptic world and continue to nominate buildings to the National Register because this kind of activity doesn't actually need people.

EXPERTS DEFINING “HERITAGE”

Now let's bring the disputed word “heritage” into this dystopian future. Can heritage exist independently of people? Before we can answer this question, we need to clearly define heritage, and move beyond its taken-for-granted, uncritical definitions. In orthodox historic preservation practice, the term essentially has become a synonym for history or historical significance and lost much of its

original meaning. The interchangeable way in which “historic” and “heritage” have been used in our field is not my observation alone; it has been documented by a number of academics and professionals as well, including internationally.² Functionally, in orthodox preservation practice, especially in relation to the regulatory environment, whether one uses history or heritage to describe something, it inevitably is synonymous with (tangible) objects and factual history, and not (intangible) sociocultural meanings, such as a folklorist would employ.

If our reference is [UNESCO’s Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage \(ICHC\)](#), however, heritage has a very specific definition based in the cultural “practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills—as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith—that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage.” Moreover, the convention recognizes that *heritage is constantly created and defined by everyday people* in response to their environment. This definition of heritage has long been found in the academic literature on the topic from such noteworthy experts as the prominent University College London geographer David Lowenthal, as well as researchers from the critical heritage studies field, such as Laurajane Smith and Rodney Harrison, and many others.³ Folklorists, who have been researching the interactions between people and place for more than 50 years, most certainly perceive heritage in this manner.⁴ In sum, based on the ICHC definition and academic studies in the field, heritage is as much about the present as the past and is defined by the people to whom it has meaning, regardless of their conventional expertise.

EXPERTS DEFINING “HISTORY” IN PRESERVATION PRACTICE

Unlike heritage, history—as used within historic preservation practice—is always about the past, is always about facts that can be documented objectively, and its meanings are controlled by conventional experts.⁵ To be sure, this definition is manifest in the many rules and regulations that direct preservation practice, such as the National Register of Historic Places (NR) criteria.⁶ In the United States, the NR is the official foundation of preservation

activity at the federal level and also has been adopted by most local municipalities (in some fashion) in their preservation ordinances. A key concept of the NR, “historical significance,” is a narrow way of describing “history” through a positivistic lens. Robert Morstein-Marx describes history through this perspective as “focus[ing] upon independently verifiable fact, stripped of all (or as much as possible) subjective ‘taint,’ and typically attended by the conviction, based on this reverence for facticity, that historical interpretation is something that somehow ‘emerges’ from the facts themselves after they have been thus properly verified.”⁷ Positivistic history is also associated with other concepts in the NR, including “broad patterns of history”, or the idea that somehow historical events can be predicted through a kind of scientific method. But, most importantly, the NR (and, by extension, broader preservation practice) erroneously assumes that significance is an innate quality of buildings and places. Or, in a more simplistic sense, what makes properties significant has nothing to do with how contemporary people perceive, conceptualize, or interpret these objects.⁸

LAYPEOPLE DEFINING “HERITAGE” INDEPENDENTLY OF “HISTORY”

But how do laypeople define heritage? What does this word mean to them? The research is consistently pointing to a concept of heritage that rejects the historical positivism inherent in the NR. For instance, Laurajane Smith, an anthropologist at the Australian National University, has been trying to answer this question with almost 3,000 interviews of laypeople conducted in the United States, Canada, and Australia. In her interviews, people overwhelmingly define “heritage” in relation to someone’s or their own “background/identity” and also associate the word with a sense of well-being, emotional security, or sense of place. Her interviewees describe heritage not as some innate quality of objects, but as meanings intimately intertwined with their own identity and experiences. For Smith’s interviewees, heritage is inexorably about what people think and do in the present and not what historical objects are (or how they exist).⁹ To be sure, the way in which Smith’s interviewees define heritage is quite compatible with the ICHC’s definition and

antithetical to the way in which “heritage” is contextualized within orthodox preservation practice as simply a synonym of history or historical significance.

In other words, whether using a rigorous and culturally sensitive academic definition of heritage, the ICHC’s definition, or laypeople’s definition, *heritage cannot exist independently of people*. In a “world without us,” heritage simply disappears because people would not be around to create it, sustain it, and use it. An alien race could not populate our post-apocalyptic world and keep heritage alive—although they certainly would be creating their own version of heritage in the process.

The reason why our heritage disappears without us is inherently related to its intangible qualities, and, more importantly, the assertion that nothing intangible can exist without us.¹⁰ According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, intangible means “not constituting or represented by a physical object and of a value not precisely measurable” and “difficult or impossible to define or understand; vague and abstract.” I challenge the reader to come up with a single instance of how something intangible can exist independently of the human mind. Returning to the concept of heritage, if it can’t exist without people, how can *any* form of heritage be tangible? Sure, the building, object, or landscape is real and exists, but these things are not heritage, they are simply objects. People create the meanings associated with heritage once these objects are interpreted, used, and changed by direct human influence. Using the phrase “intangible heritage” is equivalent, therefore, to saying “intangible intangible”; or conversely the phrase, “tangible heritage” is equivalent to saying “tangible intangible”—which is pure nonsense. Because heritage is inherently intangible, we technically do not need this adjective before it. Our lack of agreement on what heritage is, however, requires the presence of the word “intangible” to remind us that while heritage relates to the tangible world, it should not be a proxy for the physical environment of objects.

Again, *all* heritage is intangible; it cannot be otherwise. To be sure, I am not the originator of this fact nor the first one to reinforce it. I give full credit to Laurajane Smith, who introduced this idea in her groundbreaking book *Uses of Heritage* (Routledge,

2006). In justifying her claim, Smith explains that “While places, sites, objects and localities may exist as identifiable sites of heritage—we may, for instance, be able to point to such things as Stonehenge, the Sydney Opera House, Colonial Williamsburg, the Roman Coliseum, Angkor Watt, Robben Island, and so forth—these places are not inherently valuable, nor do they carry a freight of innate meaning.” What exactly is Smith saying? When we claim that a tangible object *is* heritage it is tantamount to stating that the meaning of the object is in the object itself and not in our minds or in a group of minds (otherwise known as culture). In other words, we give meaning to objects; the objects do not give meaning to us (at least not without venturing into the paranormal, which is outside the scope of this article). The critical question to ask is, do meanings have tangible form? The obvious answer is no, they do not. Claiming that tangible heritage exists is therefore patently absurd. As far as I know, I cannot see meanings or touch them. This is the essence of Smith’s argument.

Even critical heritage studies, which is arguably the wellspring from which many of these ideas arise, is mired in a confused bog of terms—not only “intangible heritage” and “tangible heritage,” but the equally absurd “intangible values” and “tangible values.” Values-based preservation/conservation became popular in the early 2000s, simultaneous with the Getty Conservation Institute’s publications on the subject, although its origins go back at least as far as William Lipe’s work on the subject in the mid 1980s.¹¹ Ostensibly, it recognizes that there are more values associated with heritage than just art/historical ones, such as cultural, social, and economic values. It is, however, a reductive approach that requires condensing the full richness of cultural meanings into a discrete set of values that lack depth in their required simplicity. In this sense, it is semi-positivistic in assuming that reality can be reduced to these discrete values rather than understood, naturally, through a full breadth of meaning.¹² When we conflate heritage and history, values and meanings suffer from the same abuse: These latter concepts are most certainly not the same, yet they are treated as such. Crucially, the philosopher Saussure reminds us that values are understood in relationship to other values, in relative order of

desirability, while meanings are not.¹³ In this sense, values are often (but not always) quantitative or semi-quantitative and are operationalized through clarity and certainty, which are characteristics that impair depth of meaning. Yet, when one looks at English-language, Western preservation/conservation literature (academic and professional), meanings and values are used interchangeably in an uncritical and naive way.

A useful example of this naive approach to values is in the phrases “intangible values” and “tangible values.” Returning to the earlier definition of “intangible,” we are reminded that this word means “vague and abstract” as well as impairing the measurability of something, which are antithetical to the required process of valuing. Thus “intangible values” is akin to asking for undefinable and unmeasurable values, which is an absurd proposition. Similarly, values, as a human concept, devoid of tangible form, make no sense in the context of “tangible values”; values, by their very nature are not part of objective reality.¹⁴ I would find it rather difficult, for instance, to physically touch a value, but I could certainly understand what it is. Or to bring us back to where we started, in a “world without us,” there can be no values.

Leaving this pedantic critique behind, it is important to realize that while the words people use may not be precise, there is a definite and often consistent meaning behind their seemingly haphazard deployment. Functionally, when intangible heritage and tangible heritage are written in a document, they typically serve as a proxy for another dichotomy: cultural meanings or material objects. Unfortunately, what this dichotomy fails to encapsulate is the possibility that cultural meanings can be derived from and associated with tangible objects. Too often, so-called intangible heritage is assumed to only apply to things like foodways, music, or performance arts when it applies equally to how buildings and places contribute to overall well-being and identity, among other possibilities. Conversely, tangible heritage is assumed to be a proxy for what Smith calls a “Eurocentric common sense definition of heritage as material.”¹⁵ In other words, it’s just a stand-in for the tangible characteristics of objects from the past. One might sound more inclusive by claiming to have a concern for built *heritage*, but

if it doesn't involve a sociocultural investigation of people's meanings associated with place, then heritage isn't really being addressed. Moreover, failure to systematically look at these meanings is a functional ignorance of the broader public or what Smith calls a process of "sidelining" people's values and meanings that is required by orthodox historic preservation practice.¹⁶ Whether intentional or not, the required language we use as professionals has the effect of alienating the very public we wish to serve.¹⁷

Yet, I am often as imprecise as anyone in using this stilted language because our field simply lacks better, more precise and easily understood words for concepts. Heritage is a messy, vague, ill-defined thing and if we proceed as if it's easy to identify, understand, and treat, we are deluding ourselves. My own use of the phrase "built heritage conservation" may appear to suffer from this deficiency, but I indeed mean it very much as it should be interpreted: the conservation of *meanings* that people associate with the built environment.

Let me unpack this idea for a moment; conventional historic preservation practice assumes that we should focus on preserving (or conserving) fabric. I offer the more human- and people-centered approach of focusing on conserving the meanings (that is, heritage) that people have for places that are important to them, which is a concept explored by the conservation theorists Silvio Zancheti and Rosane Loretto in their idea of relating "dynamic integrity" to urban continuity.¹⁸ The former approach is of great interest to architects, architectural historians, archaeologists, and art conservators; the latter approach should be of great interest to laypeople.

AN INEVITABLE CHANGE

Still, the majority of practitioners in the field of historic preservation are not ready to embrace the idea that all heritage is intangible, even if we had a logical path for doing so (hint: it doesn't yet exist). This change would completely upend the regulatory and educational frameworks traditionally used in historic preservation in the United States. Yet we must embrace the inevitability of this future in an increasingly pluralistic society; for failure to fully appreciate the sociocultural dimension of heritage can be too easily read as elitist,

lacking in empathy, and myopic of social justice and equity issues that will increasingly define historic preservation practice. The reason for this is relatively simple: more than half a century ago, architects, historians, and archaeologists created the orthodox practice of historic preservation using the values of their time and not the much wider values held by the public either then or now.¹⁹ While, alone, there is nothing inherently wrong with either set of these values in certain contexts, the problem is when the values of conventional experts dominate over the broader values of the public in contexts that are uncertain and dynamic. To be sure, this describes 75% of practice today in the United States where acceptable values are dictated by rules and regulations and not common sense.²⁰ Instead, by design, the majority of historic preservation practice “sidelines” the values of the public.²¹

In our conclusion to *Human-Centered Built Environment Heritage Preservation*, Barry Stiefel and I ask if “heritage conservation could be reconceptualized as an activity that does not impose value systems, but rather is a framework for understanding and negotiating meanings and values.”²² Such a change would require the systematic gathering of evidence using methods from the social sciences along with community-participatory-based techniques. But it would also demand replacing the nonsensical tangible/intangible dichotomy with the assumption that heritage is always intangible. In doing so, we would accept ambiguity as central to our work rather than creating our own, separate reality through the imposition of narrow systems of professional value. The meaning to be found in cultural heritage is wide-ranging and profound; we just need to figure out how to understand and manage it much better than we can do today. It’s time we embrace this challenge for the benefit of humanity—for at least as long as we exist on this planet. FJ

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- 1 Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: St. Martin’s Thomas Dunne Books, 2007).
- 2 Lynne Armitage and Janine Irons, “The values of built heritage,” *Property Management*, 31, no. 3 (2013): 246-259; Emma Waterton, *Politics, Policy and the Discourses of Heritage in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 159; ECORYS & Fitzpatrick Associates, “Economic Value of Ireland’s Historic Environment,” 7. https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/ecorys_economic_evaluation_historic_environment_final_report_1mb.pdf.

- 3 David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006); Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013); David C. Harvey, "Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies," *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7, no. 4 (2001), 319-338; Regina Bendix, "Heritage between Economy and Politics: An Assessment from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology," in *Intangible Heritage*, edited by Laurajane Smith and Natsuko Akagawa (London: Routledge, 2009).
- 4 Folklorists were particularly active in the 1970s and 1980s in working with the National Park Service in integrating their ethnographic perspectives into historic preservation practice, culminating in 1983 with the report, *Cultural Conservation: The Protection of Cultural Heritage* (Washington D.C.: Library of Congress), prepared by Ormond Loomis of the Florida State Folklife Center. The Folklore and Historic Preservation Policy Working Group of the American Folklore Society, led by co-chairs Laurie Sommers and Michael Ann Williams, is continuing this work today (see <https://www.afsnet.org/page/histprespolicy>).
- 5 For more on the concept of conventional experts' control of the meanings of history, see the "authorized heritage discourse" in Smith, *Uses of History*.
- 6 See 36 CFR § 60.4.
- 7 Robert, Morstein-Marx, "Political History," in *A Companion to Ancient History*. Edited by Andrew Erskine. Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.
- 8 Jeremy C. Wells, "The Plurality of Truth in Culture, Context, and Heritage: A (mostly) Post-structuralist Analysis of Urban Conservation Charters," *City and Time* 3, no. 2:1 (2007): 1-13.
- 9 Laurajane Smith and Gary Campbell, "The Tautology of 'Intangible Values' and the Misrecognition of Intangible Cultural Heritage," *Heritage & Society*, 10, no. 1 (2017): 26-44.
- 10 The idea that nothing intangible can exist without human beings does, of course, ignore the possibility that if aliens do exist, they would likely have intangible concepts as well. It's also possible that non-human species on this planet may also have cognitive qualities that could support intangible concepts. For purposes of simplicity, however, this article will not address these possibilities and only assume that intangible concepts apply to human beings.
- 11 Erica Avrami, Randall Mason, and Marta de la Torre, *Values and Heritage Conservation* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2000); Marta de la Torre (ed.), *Assessing the Values of Heritage Conservation* (Los Angeles: Getty Conservation Institute, 2002); William D. Lipe, "Value and Meaning in Cultural Resources," in *Approaches to the Archaeological Heritage*, edited by Henry Cleere, pp. 1-11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- 12 Nigel Walter, "From Values to Narrative: A New Foundation for the Conservation of Historic Buildings," *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 20, no. 6 (2014): 634-650.
- 13 Stephen R Yarbrough, *After Rhetoric: The Study of Discourse Beyond Language and Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 130.
- 14 See Smith, "The Tautology of 'Intangible Values'" for a much deeper exploration of these ideas.
- 15 Smith, "The Tautology of 'Intangible Values,'" 29.
- 16 Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.
- 17 Thomas F. King, *Our Unprotected Heritage: Whitewashing the Destruction of Our Cultural and Natural Resources* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).
- 18 Silvio Mendes Zancheti, Rosane Piccolo Loretto, "Dynamic integrity: a concept to historic urban landscape," *Journal of Cultural Heritage Management and Sustainable Development*, 5 Issue 1 (2015): 82-94.
- 19 See John H. Sprinkle, *Crafting Preservation Criteria: The National Register of Historic Places and American Historic Preservation* (New York: Routledge, 2014).
- 20 For more about how various areas of practice define the preservation field, see Jeremy C. Wells, "Challenging the Assumption about a Direct Relationship between Historic Preservation and Architecture in the United States," *Frontiers of Architectural Research*, 7, no.4 (2018): 455-464; for an exploration of how historic preservation practice lacks common sense, see Jeremy C. Wells, "Are We 'Ensnared in the System of Heritage' Because We Do Not Want to Escape?," *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, 13, no. 1 (2017): 26-47.
- 21 For more about how the public's values are unintentionally "sidelined" by preservation professionals, see Smith, *Uses of Heritage*.
- 22 Jeremy C. Wells and Barry L. Stiefel, "Conclusion: A Human-Centered Way Forward," in *Human-Centered Built Environment Heritage Preservation: Theory and Evidence-Based Practice*, edited by Jeremy C. Wells and Barry L. Stiefel, 317-332 (New York & London: Routledge, 2019), 327.