

ASPECTS OF AN UNCONVENTIONAL PRESERVATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper was written following a keynote lecture by Darren Barker at the International Scientific Conference 75th Anniversary of UACEG, 2017 Sofia, Bulgaria. It considers responses to preservation and attempts to describe how alternative approaches to the conventional notion of preservation might enable some critical re-evaluation.

It asks why preservation is often unquestioned as an activity and regarded as universally beneficial. It suggests that preservation distorts historic accuracy and even time by manipulating the past, present and future.

It identifies potential antidotes and alternative ways of working which take an unconventional approach to preservation.

1. Authorised Preservation

“Humanity must perforce prey on itself like monsters of the deep”.
W. Shakespeare. King Lear

The first consideration should not be why we preserve cultural heritage but why preservation is often unquestioned fostering an almost blind acceptance that the preservation of cultural heritage is always positive and in the best interest of societies.

An alternative view might be that the act of preservation often works to support and promote ideologies and agendas which are not transparent and may not be beneficial. There is rarely a critical understanding as to why we enter into the process of preservation. There is often little knowledge of who has decided the significance as cultural heritage worthy of preservation, or who is funding the activity and why?

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Allied to this is the belief that governments and non-government organisation's motives for preservation are virtuous and beneficial. Where an alternative view might be that all cultural heritage is political heritage, with the act of preservation working to support and promote political ideologies. It might be argued that the agendas and criteria for preservation and the underlying aims of preservation are rarely considered. That behind every act of preservation is a motive which is driven by political dogma.

Whereby funders and organisations act as puppets to political-will and even if it seems alien to their accepted agendas would promote the unfamiliar for preservation, but only for the consolidation and perpetuation of their own, or their puppet masters, identities. It can be seen as nothing more than a ploy to appear benevolent and altruistic to manipulate image and perceptions, and a desperate desire to appear non-elitist.

Running parallel to this, preservation has, over recent years, become an industry, it is a business and as with all businesses notions of income and expenditure, profit forecasts, and growth are key considerations.

It is in the interest of this industry to effectively perpetuate the act of preservation consuming all that it can, constantly chasing its own tail until it finally consumes itself, or less poetically, until preservation has preserved itself [1].

2. Distortion

“People assume that time is a strict progression of cause and effect, but actually from a nonlinear, non-subjective viewpoint, it’s more like a big ball of wibbly wobbly, timey, wimey stuff”.
The Doctor [2]

Preservation can distort in other ways too for example by seeking out the positive elements of our history. It works to express the best of our national cultural identity. In the UK this might be cottages, cathedrals, a sense of fair play and yet we often choose to ignore the negative elements. Or only begrudgingly preserve the “negative” if the act of doing so can be perversely presented as a positive. This is of course natural but is none the less a distortion.



Nick Hedges. National Media Museum Bradford 1966

In the late 1980's the academic Robert Hewison invented the phrase "Heritage Industry" using it to describe a sanitisation and commercialisation of the past [3]. His argument was that heritage was imposed from above to propagate middle-class nostalgia for a halcyon past in the context of decline.

This distortion supports the sense of the past as being a better place, a golden age, not any particular period but an amalgam of all that has been before. A muddled and ill-conceived nostalgic contrivance. The reality is of course that the past was not better, at best it was the same but for many it was dismal.

This distorted view of the past can be used as a shield to protect against a perceived view of a dystopia present. In 1977 the Sex Pistols exploded onto our cultural horizon with a mantra of "No Future" [4]. This was the bitter cry from a disenfranchised generation with no prospects, expectations or hope, but more powerfully it was a prophecy that we will perpetually inhabit the past.

This sanctuary in the past is not an accurate portrayal but instead a nostalgia driven green and pleasant halcyon utopia that never really existed. The fact that this isn't accurate doesn't even matter because it is consumer driven and propagated by corporations, governments and institutions as an authorised heritage, and all carried out with a ferocious frenzy by the "heritage industry" or preservation business.

This can be seen as a museumification of our culture which seems to be accelerating and will reach a point where the past has consumed the present and then looks greedily to the future. We will exist only in a manufactured past, a Disneyesque heritage theme park dumbing us all into bubble wrapped pseudo heritage euphoria. Rather than learning from and being inspired by the past we will recreate and try to re-establish the past, not in an act of mimicry or homage but in an effort to distort time, to bend time so that the future loops back to an invented halcyon.

We have become time travellers but through contrivance rather than through any laws of physics or science.

3. Gentrification

*"There's a car park going up, and they're pulling down the pubs and it's just another bloody rainy day".
Shane Macgowan. White City [5]*

When a manufactured past is re-presented in the present as an aspiration for the future it allows the gentrifiers and their corrosive ambitions access to distort things further.

For example; in 2001 a man sprayed a romantic gesture to his lover on a tower block in Sheffield, England, [6] "I love you will u marry me". In 2006 the regeneration company Urban Splash was appointed to redevelop this run-down building and area. The same year a replica of the graffiti was displayed at the Venice Biennale of Architecture. The slogan became a marketing campaign for gentrification, misappropriated for T-shirts, beer bottles and cushions. Indeed, a clever and alternative way of preservation and a marketing dream.

In reality it was not a fairy tale with a happy-ever-after but a tragic account of poverty, dependency, social cleansing and early death, a cycle of despair only too familiar with the poor. However all that mattered was the power of the slogan, corrupting its preservation and the distortion of historic events. The preservation of buildings, areas, objects, the tangible and intangible can be used as a tool for gentrification.

Buildings and areas are preserved and regenerated through preservation-led-regeneration. Superficially bringing enormous benefits as historic buildings are restored, living

conditions improved, new schools, shops, economic growth and property prices increase. The preservationists are happy, the developers are richer and the new residents move into these “up and coming” neighbourhoods.



But this gentrification through preservation is really a displacement of people and culture. The community together with their activities and cultural traditions are all cleansed to make way for coffee shops, so called artisan cafes and an entitled elite. This particular preservation activity perversely causes the loss and erosion of cultural heritage. The historic buildings are better repaired but their value and significance is eroded.

Much of the special character of places and their value is made up from rich layers of community and activity. It is this which contributes so significantly to local distinctiveness and vibrancy and can not be recreated through artifice or the empty gesture of nodding towards a sanitised past.

4. Unconventional Responses

“For last year's words belong to last year's language”.

T. S. Eliot. Little Gidding

Community empowerment is one possible antidote and can result in alternative approaches to preservation. An example is the Great Yarmouth Cemeteries Project [7] where a forty acre cemetery which lay largely abandoned. The cemetery was recorded, cleared, researched, repair and all to provide community training. It was organised and managed by a local charity Great Yarmouth Preservation Trust and delivered by the community. Training was given to the long term unemployed and so called “hard to reach groups”. It was the community reclaiming their heritage, the success and benefits were astounding and led to increased skills, employment and the creation of a social enterprise company to continue community led preservation of cultural heritage in the town.

The outcomes speak for themselves and crucially the very nature of what made the places significant, remains and is reinforced.



Darren Barker. GYPT 2013

The same charity used this training and inclusion model to preserve an abandoned and derelict church [8]. Once again, the community under guidance took direct action. They worked to learn about the place, its fabric, its archaeology and to consolidate and repair the ancient ruin. Learning new skills and embedding themselves into the place by bringing a new layer of significance while respecting what had gone before.



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And there are other ways to respond to and defy the authorised preservation; one might explore seemingly unlikely and improbable cultural heritage. For example, waste, trash, detritus, litter, or even the blood spilt on the pavement on a Saturday night.

A conservation project in Bulgaria [9] has inspired interventions in abandoned buildings across Bulgaria, Britain and Taiwan, these interventions respond to and explore connections between art, architecture and preservation. It reimagined preservation and in the process casually demystified preservation.

This transnational offspring, is unorganised and unmanaged but finds its own path and has naturally occurred as conservators, artists and architects collaborate and react to abandoned spaces. It is not constrained by borders, budget, time or funders conditions, it simply happens.

The first took place in the church of St Johns, [10] which once huddled alone on the dunes of Great Yarmouth, built as the headquarters of the Beach and Harbour Mission who strove to improve the moral and religious condition of the wayward beach-men, sailors, fishermen and their families.



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Like other abandoned buildings St Johns is full of items, shadows of former lives, remains of jumble sales, debris and rubbish, many of little consequence, but all of this detritus has previous memories and uses. This mixed collection of items brings a new layer of interest and richness to the building with each item seemingly worthless yet each holding a matrix of significances.

Architects used the collection of objects to question the accepted preservation conventions and especially what is considered worthy of preservation and who decides. It strives to take an unconventional approach to preservation while making connections between art and architecture.

The project turns to improbable cultural objects to question and explore preservation. In the case of St Johns, the abandoned objects symbolise everyday life, the ordinary, the unremarkable, the waste from our societies, the trash which is considered worthless as a cultural reference and only fit for the skip and land fill site.

Instead its offers waste as one of the most significant contributions to our cultural identity and the cultural awareness of our communities. As what is thrown away can truly help to describe communities, never more so than in our throw-away society. One where a fundamental cultural reference is the creation and manufacture of objects that become obsolete and disposed of almost immediately. Importantly preserving what has been discarded and is obsolete, strives to question who decides what should be preserved.

Seeking to articulate the architectural space in which the objects have accumulated they are suspended from the vaulted ceiling. This manipulation of objects within the building allowed the architecture to be addressed rather than just as a space to exhibit in.

The explosion of waste plots a pathway of detritus within the church creating a rhythm of spatial-temporal intervals as a consequence of outcries and pauses aiming to provoke questions to the viewer. It is an architectural comment connecting the spatial layout of the church with the spatial trajectories of threads of thoughts on contemporary culture and the activity of preservation.

This intervention triggered potential reuses for the abandoned building including suspended pods for accommodation. These could provide a short term, low cost and flexible solution to local housing needs.



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By arranging all the waste within the church space, it might be possible to trace an invisible pathway linking past, present and future of the building by questioning our present day cultural values.

Similarly, an abandoned building in Bulgaria [9] defining depopulation, the loss of a complete way of life, with objects left, scattered. These abandoned houses are poignant and echo with the lives of the former inhabitants and are now oppressively sad.

The significance here is not only the architectural space itself but the smells, the stains, the memories and the shadows of occupation. Some projects can strip buildings of layers of meaning by bleaching the stains. In this building the narrative is greatly enhanced by the remnants left behind, but even without such obvious connections the spaces resonant with a weight of memory.



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Lifting the objects and suspending them in one room, preserves them, but only temporarily. What was once cherished and was then abandoned floats liberated. The objects and their memories, the multi layered meanings and significances float captured for a moment. A photograph, a shoe, a letter from a daughter, tools used to gather corn, a hundred years of heavy trivia.

This small intervention in an abandoned building on a forgotten plateau describes depopulation, the plight of a community, a diaspora.

The next stage for this series of interventions was an abandoned school in Douliu, Taiwan. The building emblematic of a nation and its story of rapid economic growth striving for excellence at all levels but sometimes at the risk of neglecting its past. Built in the 1950's already redundant in a frenzy of new build.

Taiwanese conservators and British artists worked together inspired by the superstitious practice of the concealed object. Where the object and intense connection with the motives for concealing are preserved. A potent stimulus leading to new areas for interventions in spaces. Objects were gathered from one classroom and then concealed. *“Superstitious ritual often survived the religious beliefs that gave birth to it and was reinterpreted in the light of current beliefs”* [11].

Small interventions in spaces, and experimenting through arranging, rearranging, suspending, hiding and balancing causes changes which disrupt the natural process of decay, interfering with the rhythm of deterioration.

The objects were left out of context but curiously remaining within context. The intervention creates a modified ephemeral preservation. The playfulness and subtle defiance beautifully reflecting the Taiwanese character.

As the response to abandonment rippled out across three countries interventions began to happen spontaneously with many left unrecorded and uncorrupted by any notion of an “authorised preservation”.

One example in a neglected and vacant building which could have been anywhere saw objects from a room, sticks, kindling, twine, plaster and stones which had fallen from the walls rearranged. This intervention imposed an illogical order that was visceral, immediate and then once finished left abandoned again allowing time to rearrange the objects once more.

Somehow, and I don't understand how, but the act of photographing it, recording it has inadvertently corrupted it. I think it would be better to undertake the invention and leave it unrecorded, to live only in the memory and then as time passes for the memory to fade, there would be a more beautiful harmony to this.



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I should like to encapsulate these little rooms. To encase them in concrete. To pickle them in jars. To bury them deep in the earth.

There is a former fire station building in Bulgaria [12], modest, mundane, a prosaic building. A building without charm, it is just another poorly conceived, poorly constructed reminder of the everyday. A constant in every town, only significant in its ordinariness and reassuring in its banality.

Why even consider such a building? It is because it is architectural trash, it represents our culture, it says more about us than any cathedral? It is discarded and it sublimely represents all of us.

There has been a series of student proposals for creative reuse, all wonderful, some hilarious. But I considered it in terms of a different preservation an alternative preservation. In this case the ultimate form of preservation which is absolutely no intervention.

No artificial preservation, no comprehensive restoration, no minor or subtle changes. But just the luxury of nothingness. The act of not acting. All that is important is allowing time to play out its role.

The process of decay becomes the only purpose for the building it has no other use. The most defiant of all preservation gestures and seemingly the very contradiction of preservation.

But the building will be playing out its role, a cycle of existence, deterioration and loss. The preservation of this cycle is surely the definition of preservation. This is no longer just architecture or preservation, or a space between architecture and art.

Romanticising decay can be an indulgent cliché. We have all seen the books so beautifully photographed of deteriorating buildings. But my proposal is not to make this a monument or a gallery to decay, because the very act of viewing the decay will corrupt the process, to witness it will somehow destroy the process of preserving it.

Instead I propose the building is encased and it is left, with no way in and no way out. It is marooned unhindered to play out a secret and unwitnessed life, a compelling marriage between the building and time. This may seem counter intuitive but the constant of time and the action of time on a building becomes fundamental. We can only guess at what is happening inside. Therefore, no artifice of museumfication and no halcyon past and no future, but only the passage of time.

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