



Heritage in a van

The paradox of intangibility

Abstract

'Intangible heritage' is a profound concept articulated in international charters, national legislation and conservation practice accreditation frameworks worldwide. By discussing the renovation of the former home of the writer Alan Bennett, where *The lady in the Van* was filmed, this paper seeks to re-address the role of non-physical heritage in supporting communal meaning by placing to the fore some of its fragilities, assumptions and inherent confusion that are manifest when the concept of 'intangible heritage' meets the reality of a construction project.

Keywords

Heritage, Intangibility, Authority, Value, Imaginary.

INTRODUCTION

The Lady in the Van is the most famous play by Alan Bennett, a renowned British playwright, screenwriter, actor and author. In 2015 the play became the film directed by Nicholas Hytner, starring Dame Maggie Smith. Based on the autobiographical memoir of Bennett it tells of the eccentric relationship between the writer and a homeless woman called Miss Mary Shepherd who lived in a van parked in the playwright's front garden from 1974 to 1989. The house in question is a Regency villa on Camden's Gloucester Crescent, where Bennett balanced his writing career with watching over Shepherd. The success of the play and the film, combined with the exceptional nature of the story they tell, has made the story a true myth, increasing the intangible value of the place, its significance in cultural and social terms. During Bennett's time there, the house had been Listed by English Heritage (1999) as it was the first house built in the Crescent and of value as a distinguished design. After 40 years of living in the house, Bennett left and rented it to a photographer friend until 2014 when the house was adapted to become the filmset, an exceptional authentic location for a true story. After the film completed the house remained empty. In 2019 the house was sold, and after unauthorized interventions by a builder the eventual renovation and repair was entrusted to the architectural practice Arts Lettres Techniques, one of whose partners is Alan Chandler, co-author of this article. Through the experience of the renovation of Alan Bennett's house, the paper aims to reflect on the intangibility of heritage and the ambiguous nature of this definition when applied to lived spaces. Indeed, intangibility increasingly suffers from a paradox: while defining the subtle qualities that make heritage 'intangible', there is a need to recognize material references to it, thus producing an inevitable objectification of the intangibility in question. How to manage intangibility in a world made of things?

INTANGIBLE HERITAGE

The meaning of 'intangible' can be swapped with the word 'imaginary' quite seamlessly, yet one carries authority and dignity while the other whimsy and insubstantiality. Whoever dictates the story persuades the audience of its credibility as much as any intrinsic worth the story describes:

Intangible: impossible to touch, to describe exactly, or to give an exact value: (similar: impalpable)

Imaginary: Something that is imaginary is created by and exists only in the mind: (similar: unreal, non-existent, fictional, fictitious). [Cambridge Dictionary]

Working within a necessarily consistent heritage framework we are condemned to apply definitions created for a world made of material and (to a great extent) measurable through science to attributes that are evaluated only through the humanities. Is this a problem for heritage itself, or problem of communication and interpretation (Eco, 1987; Groote & Haarsten, 2008)?

UNESCO's efforts to establish an instrument for the protection of what is now called intangible heritage date back to 1952. However, things have evolved considerably since then¹ (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004; UNESCO 2003; Byrne, 2008). For the purposes of this paper we want to consider tangible and intangible heritage as part of the same discourse (Byrne, 2008, p. 131). Smith (2006), for example, defines heritage being by nature discursive, nearing the position of Harvey when he says that "heritage is about the process by which people use the past – a 'discursive construction' with material consequences" (Harvey, 2008, p. 23).

Fig. 1 - Hytner, N., *The Lady in the Van*, 2015, frames from the movie trailer. Sony Pictures. Retrieved March 08, 2023 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGiyqVBxndU>



Graham and Howard add that “heritage is less about tangible material artifacts or other intangible forms of the past that about the meaning placed upon them and the representation that can be created from them” (Graham & Howard, 2008, p. 32; Graham, Ashworth & Tunbridge, 2000; Brett, 1996).

The discursive nature of heritage therefore calls into play both material and material elements, ascribing them to the formation of a narrative. But who fabricates the narratives related to heritage? How do architects acknowledge the responsibility that accompanies this storytelling? Where on the spectrum between history and fiction do we place our project – particularly when the central figure in this paper creates fiction from fact. Perhaps it is not only authors who do this.

As explained by Hassard (2008), major international documents in recent years reveal that there has been a general movement towards the reconciliation of tangible and intangible domains driven by a new understanding of the concept of authenticity. This attitude is based upon the “understanding that both the tangible and intangible domains are co-related and inter-dependent when it comes to their preservation and safeguarding, respectively” (Hassard, 2008, p. 286). In the context of renovation, however, the convergence of tangible and intangible takes particular deviations as one is inclined to think that the unquestioning preservation of architectural elements is also a way of ensuring the cultural value of the building. William Morris created this compelling narrative, summed up in his letter to the Daily Chronicle newspaper on 4th October 1895 “in these days when history is studied so keenly through genuine original documents [...] it seems pitiable indeed that the most important documents of all, the ancient buildings of Middle Ages [...] should be falsified by an uneasy desire to do something”.

VALUE AND MUTATION

The notion of ‘value’ has become expanded and problematised within the field of heritage studies. Historic buildings were generally considered either as a material, technical fact to be analysed, historicized and sustained, or linked to a wider understanding of the society that produced them, bringing in cultural memory through historical narrative that is communicated more or less effectively to locals and passers-by. What happens if we revisit Morris and push him further? What happens if value is the material fabric and its ongoing use fused together? If every action we make is part of the history of a building or place and we replace ‘conservation’ with ‘engagement’?

Value: the importance or worth of something for someone (similar: merit, usefulness), also principles and standards of behaviour (similar: ethics, morals), also numerical amount, quantity. (Cambridge Dictionary)

This approach questions the fixity of images that are produced through a purely conservative approach, and considers them as part of a moving narrative that can be enriched by multiple and unexpected contributions.

The refusal to locate history in the past, but see it as an unfolding present is not new in heritage. The material historical fabric that Morris prioritized is and becomes a record of time and use, and as such sustains the reality of history within it. Ultimately Morris (1877) proposes that we enhance an old building by continuing to wear it out. Use is relevance, skilled repair is engagement, buildings are active, not a spectacle.

The case of Alan Bennett's house and how it acquired cultural value concerns precisely these issues. Not only was it the home of a writer, but it was also a place where personal and professional stories were intertwined. The value of the house, therefore, could not only be found in its architectural features but also in the continuous work of writing and rewriting that personal and collective vicissitudes had matured.

The renovation project had to deal with the construction of a complex image, made of memories, of intangible values: when we talk about enhancement are we enhancing the materiality, or the memory?

BUILDING AS DOCUMENT – FICTION OR NON-FICTION?

Bennett's writing sits precisely in the zone between biography and fiction – which for the purposes of this paper became extended into the physical space of his own house, then again into the biographically fictive space of the play. To recapture an image of that time using the contrived reality of the real space to film history that is itself both real and fictive may appear unique to this case, but as our experience of space is increasingly moderated by digitally available media like film or online sharing platforms, the basis on which we understand the difference between fiction and non-fiction, between objective evidence and subjective elaboration holds no real reassurance.

The house itself is a blend of late Georgian building fabric and late 1960's interventions by the writer, when negotiating its renovation with the planning authorities this meant haggling over retaining plasterboard and a DIY kitchen made by an out of work actor in 1968.

What then are we aiming to preserve – the writers technically disastrous but culturally significant interiors, or the quiet technical innovations of an unknown Georgian builder? When overriding technical failures are also the accrued 'heritage value', the negotiation between performance potential, cost envelope and historic fabric

Fig. 2 - Arts Lettres Techniques, *Diptych: The living room before and after restoration*, 2019-2022, London.



requirements presents challenges, but for architects this creates opportunities to deploy our awareness of how material performance, historic significance and user needs are brought together.

In the movie, Alan Bennett becomes, in spite of himself, the main carer of reference for Miss Shepherd, and for this reason maintains relations and meetings with social services in Camden. Although it denies 'caring' for anyone, the story itself, as much as the cultural value gained by the writer's dwelling, and the preservation its idiosyncratic character, has much to do with the notion of caring. If, as William Morris proposed (1877), we understand a building as a document, do we choose to edit or re-write? This question is essentially about how the intangible takes shape, how care, choices and actions concerning a layered heritage contribute to the final image of a piece of the city. Bennett's ground floor living room cum study were acknowledged to be of the highest heritage significance, he himself confirmed "I had an oval table in the bay window, and always worked there" (letter to new owners, 03.08.20), and in his published diaries revealed why - "I'd worked in a bay window looking onto the street where there was always enough going on to divert me in the gaps of my less than continuous production [...]"

The space Bennett refers to is high ceilinged with original joinery, marble fireplaces, timber floors with an ornate part run/part cast acanthus cornice. Bennett made three significant interventions - utilitarian varnished pine bookshelves and theatrically placed mirrors to visually extend space were retained and carefully cleaned; "the opening between the living room and the study was adjusted. The double doors were taken off and the opening lowered. There was also a door immediately to the left of the arch in the study and I blocked that up and put bookshelves over it. It never quite worked, I felt" (letter to the new owners, 13.07.20); and most ephemeral but ironically most compelling change - the decoration of the walls themselves.

The wall surfaces of this central space were painted by Bennett himself using Quink brand writing ink and Copydex to create a faux-Pompeian lazure finish that acted as an 'antique' backdrop to numerous closely spaced pictures. With moisture ingress parting Quink from Copydex, and the spaces too overpowering for anyone but the author the destiny of these walls were densely debated with the authorities. The compromise was reached partly on preservationist grounds, the lazure too fragile to be exposed meant a methodology that both concealed and revealed. The majority of the walls were papered over to allow a less overt decorative treatment whilst preserving the handiwork, a section of which was left visible within the confines of the set of bookshelves that Bennett closed his doorway with. This became an act of veneering rather than the making of a palimpsest (which scrapes clean to re-write).

Support from Bennett himself came in written form - his letter directly to the Conservation officer argued against reinstatement, adding his own perspective to the layers:

"I wouldn't like to think that my writing in the house has meant that my alterations get more permanence than they deserve. In that case I might have kept the derelict van in the drive out of respect for the part Miss Shepherd played in my life!"

CONCLUSIONS

The experience of restoring Alan Bennett's house/workplace/filmset/document shows us how dealing with heritage as reality and imaginary means dealing with a form of narrative: the house - every house is a complex object on which cultural meanings and images had been stratified, an interweaving of private and public stories real and even staged and thus becoming, together with the portrayed object, part of the collective imagination.

Fig. 3 - Chandler, A., Pace, M., *Study triptych: reality-imaginary-reality*. Left: Antony Crolla, Alan Bennett's studio, London. Centre: Hytner, N., *The Lady in the Van*, 2015, frame showing the studio. Sony Pictures. Retrieved March 08, 2023 from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCiyqVBxndU>. Right: Arts Lettres Techniques: the renovated studio, 2022 London.



The restoration experience conducted by Arts Lettres Techniques took as its starting point the 're-writing' approach postulated by William Morris, that the value of heritage (tangible and intangible) is based on contribution, i.e. on the possibility of additional meanings being injected into the narrative. "History alive midst the deeds of its fashioning" (SPAB Manifesto, 1877) rather than following UNESCO's injunction to record and conserve intangible heritage verbatim. It would be more valuable to examine the politics of visibility (Byrne, 2008) in the production of heritage and understand that change, intrusions, contributions from different stakeholders and its material qualities that shift and decay over time can continuously alter both narratives and forms.

In contrast, the freezing of physical heritage through the preservation of intangible values carries certain risks. The main one is that heritage is glorified through aesthetic redemption rather than spatial occupation. Suspended between the tangible and the intangible, heritage ends up as a place of romantic consumption and exclusive gratification (Žižek, 2008). What we make clear, however, with this paper, is that intangible heritage is surely a dense and mutable reality: wear, tear, repair all denote the genuine relation between people and the building, and as such preservation and continuity are intrinsic to this approach.

Alan and Rupert re-visited the house at Christmas in 2022 when the house was finished – they felt at home.

NOTE

1. In the early stages, the intangibility of heritage was generally linked to elements of folklore (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 2004). It was not until the 1990s that there was a definite shift from artefacts to people, which became more specific with the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (2003). The Convention (Article 2.1) defines intangible heritage as the 'practices, representations, expressions, knowledge and skills' present in a culture, along with 'instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith' (Byrne, 2008).

REFERENCES

- Blumenfield, T. & Silverman, H. (Eds.) (2013). *Cultural Heritage: Politics in China*. London: Springer.
- Brett, D. (1996) *The Construction of Heritage*. Cork: Cork University Press.
- Byrne, D. (2008). A critique of unfeeling heritage. In L. Smith & N. Akagawa (Eds.), *Intangible Heritage* (pp. 229-252). London: Routledge.

- Eco, U. (1987). *I limiti dell'interpretazione*. Milano: La Nave di Teseo.
- Graham, B.J., Ashworth, G., & Tunbridge, J.E. (Eds.) (2000). *A geography of Heritage: Power, Culture, Economy*. London: Arnold.
- Graham, B.J., & Howards, P. (Eds.) (2008). *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*. Franham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Groote, P., & Haarsten, T. (2008). The Communication of Heritage: Creating Place Identities. In B.J. Graham, & P. Howards (Eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (pp.181-194). London: Routledge.
- Harvey, D.C. (2008). The History of Heritage. In B.J. Graham & P. Howards (Eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (pp.19-36). Franham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Hassard, F. (2008). Intangible heritage in the United Kingdom: The dark side of enlightenment? In L. Smith & N. Akagawa (Eds.), *Intangible Heritage* (pp. 280-299). London: Routledge.
- Hytner, N. (Director). (2015). *The Lady in the Van* [Film]. TriStar Pictures, TriStar Productions, BBC Films.
- Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, B. (2004). Intangible Heritage as Metacultural Production. *Museum International*, 56, 52-65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1350-0775.2004.00458.x>
- Morris, W. (1985). The Restoration of Rouen Cathedral, *Daily Chronicles*, 4th October 1895.
- Morris, W. (1877). The SPAB Manifesto: The Principals of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings as Set Forth upon its Foundation. In *The Getty Conservation Institute*. Retrieved March 8, 2023 from https://www.getty.edu/conservation/publications_resources/research_resources/charters/charter00.html
- UNESCO. (2023). *Text of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Retrieved June 13, 2023, from: <https://ich.unesco.org/en/>
- Smith, L. (2006). *Uses of Heritage*. London: Routledge.
- Žižek, S. (2008). *The sublime object of ideology*. London and New York: Verso (first published 1989).

Cover figure - Chandler, A., Pace, M., *Study Triptych: the renovation of Alan Bennett's house*. Left: Arts Lettres Techniques, Alan Bennett's house as found, London 2018. Centre: Alan Bennett in his studio, London 1970. Provided by the Author, no named photographer. Right: Arts Lettres Techniques, Alan Bennett's house as now, London 2022.