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New heritage frontiers

For *Heritage and beyond* launch

NEW HERITAGE FRONTIERS

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1. Introduction – A Tale of Two Conventions

The idea of heritage is deeply-embedded in European culture and society. And we all know that ideas can be more powerful than actions.

In the past ten or fifteen years, however, new understandings of heritage have started to emerge.

These encapsulate the idea that heritage consists not just of objects but of relationships that grow from interactions between people and their world, and from interactions between people.

This is the perspective promoted by the Faro Convention. It gives heritage a much greater power and influence.

Faro has a sister convention – Florence, the European Landscape Convention (the ELC). There is strong solidarity between the concepts of heritage and landscape, and the two Conventions are not surprisingly complementary. They belong to the same generation, which prompts the question of how the Grenada and Valetta conventions on architecture and archaeology might be revised for the 21st century.

Florence has something else in common with Faro. Portugal. The country we are in today has given a home to the Faro Convention, but it has also long-championed the ELC, signing it on the very day of its publication on 20 October 2000.

HERITAGE

2. Heritage as action and process

The word ‘heritage’ denotes actions as well as objects, and processes as well as products.

It thus has two separate modes:

- Descriptive, to signify those objects that we worry about preserving,
- Active, as if it were a verb, for the process (and philosophy) of looking after and exploiting those objects.

Faro encourages us to use it more often in the second, active sense.

3. Multiple values

In its active sense, heritage is not restricted to “official” actions or laws. It includes the most basic and egalitarian processes of a person’s being and becoming in the world.

Expert, official or orthodox ways of seeing or valuing heritage remain valid. Of course. There are however multiple and plural ways of seeing and acting. Some of these value systems may not be scientific or objective, but they may still be part of heritage. All that is required is a framework of tolerance and acceptance of diverse viewpoints.

This too is the message of Faro. The same heritage may mean different things to different communities, and conversely one community’s heritage may not be another’s. Binding together all this multiplicity, however, are the concepts of common heritage, of responsibilities towards other people’s heritage as well as rights to your own.

4. The totality of our inheritance

Another aspect of Faro (and Florence, through its landscape lens) is that heritage is not restricted to “the things we wish to pass on” but embraces “everything we have inherited”. Passing heritage on to our successors (‘keeping’) is just one way of responding to this inheritance; there are other ways, such as celebrating it as it fades away or is transformed, or using it to effect a transformation.

The equation of “heritage” with only the parts we try to keep has perhaps created many of the economic and political barriers that constrain the heritage process. It risks dividing past from future. It risks overlooking common heritage in favour of an official selection; it may create a self-defeating dichotomy between heritage and change. Faro offers an alternative more holistic approach.

5. An ever expanding universe of heritage

Many new categories have recently been added to the scope of cultural heritage, for instance, contemporary buildings, Cold War military remains, semi-natural elements of landscape, intangible, ephemeral, marginal or liminal heritage, or the ugly and the painful as well as the beautiful and the uplifting.

The “discovery” of new types of cultural heritage is however not exactly discovery. New Worlds are new only to incomers (visitors, explorers and travellers or, in our context, experts).

New insights have emerged into the relationship between experts and everyone else. Much of the desire for expanding heritage came from non-expert but highly engaged

groups. Faro raises questions about the role of authority – how it is used, where it comes from.

SOCIETY

6. Users and viewpoints

Article 2 of the Convention speaks of “resources”, rather than “assets”. Regarding heritage as a resource acknowledges that it exists to be used, and that therefore there are users who will benefit - people, individually or in “heritage communities”. Faro tries to put these people at the centre of debate. This automatically gives heritage broader social value.

One of the uses of heritage is to create or strengthen identity. Most heritage objects, like landscape, accommodate different, divergent or even competing demands, and this heritage’s strength. There can be many “owners” of heritage. Nor does heritage have a closed, finite definition; it is a continuous process of ‘working towards’. Heritage is constantly re-made, made as well as inherited.

People have always had their own definitions of their cultural heritage, and of its frontiers. These ‘public’ or personal definitions existed, side by side with “official” or “legal”, elite or scientific definitions. Sometimes they overlapped, sometimes conflicted; often they were invisible to each other or ignored each other. For Faro to make a difference, borders between them should become porous.

7. Ambitions and objectives

Cultural heritage is not a resource for its own use, but for broader social and cultural goals. Faro offers ways to contribute to these higher aims.

Whereas traditional heritage policy focused on the simple idea of preserving the most important sites for (supposedly) their own sake, Faro take us far beyond this by pushing heritage into the mainstream of all aspects of government and societal policy and economic activity.

Faro insists that cultural heritage is a basic part of people’s lives, part of identity, an essential component of “place”, a foundation for quality of life. Cultural heritage also supports economic prosperity, and is critical to environmental protection.

8. Attitudes

The heritage sector is better equipped these days to protect sites. In many parts of Europe, well-prepared and well-resourced preservation mechanisms have strong popular support.

These systems, however, depend on selection using national or specialist measurements; normally only the best sites benefit. In contrast, in the Faro perspective of democratically owned and defined heritage, things not on national lists can be important too. Other factors apart from changes in the perceived role of experts, such as the “rise of the local”, have helped to turn public attention towards a more democratically defined and “ordinary” heritage, just as Faro advises.

9. Living Issues

As heritage’s frontiers expand, it comes ever closer to being an active part of the socio-economic processes that shape the future.

The scale of current change around us might seem daunting, but heritage needs to be seen not just as a way to mitigate some of its effects but as part of the changes. It can do this in various ways, at social, demographic, economic, and environmental levels.

Social issues include people’s quality of life and community identities, to which ‘place’ and therefore both heritage and landscape make a key contribution.

Demographic issues such as migration are important. People carry their heritage with them, in memory if not physically; to adapt they will sometimes share it on arrival and they will find and make new heritage in their new homes. European heritage for example exists on other continents. People on other continents – and this hardly needs saying in Lisbon of all cities – have heritage in Europe. Government definitions of heritage are poorly fitted to such fluid and ever-changing circumstances.

Economic aspects of heritage are far from restricted to tourism. Heritage contributes broadly to the economy in the same way as society’s other fundamental resources such as land, people or raw materials. It stands in the very mainstream of economic activity. High quality of place attracts business, employment, people; good quality landscapes which for many people means those with strong historic and cultural dimensions, support successful economies.

Environmental issues include the unavoidable truth that life is lived amongst what was made before. We do not have a natural environment but a highly humanised, artificial, modified one; furthermore, the main ways that people view the environment and construct their mental landscapes is cultural and social, not environmental. Solutions to environmental problems have to be social solutions as well

10. Conclusions

In conclusion, heritage policy faces two roads. The low road leads to a small number of highly managed and publicly subsidised sites defined by national criteria. The high road

is sign-posted 'Faro'; its milestones are identity, community, sense of place, landscape, sustainability, inclusivity.

- The first approach might be said to erect strong walls around a few places, whereas Faro breaks through those walls to engage with social debates elsewhere.
- The first, places national measures of significance above all else; Faro puts the notion of national heritage into a broader spectrum.
- The first approach centres on things, Faro on people.

If I have exaggerated the superiority of the Faro model, it is because current policy, guidance and law strongly favour the first, increasingly unsustainable, approach. In contrast, the young voices that have been raised by Faro and Florence need amplification in order to be heard.

Faro throws a new light on the old question of how society can afford the cost of heritage. In times of global social and environmental challenge, and perhaps of recession, the traditional approach to heritage is ill-fitted to the task and difficult to pay for. Faro's approach to heritage, however, becomes essential. The question is not the old one of what is the price of heritage, but what is the cost of not sensibly using heritage.

Heritage as a cultural process is now sufficiently mature and socially-embedded to take its place in the hurly-burly, *le tohu-bohu*, of public debate over the future. Faro points the way. We can afford to be more relaxed about protecting things, and move to other fields of influence. We hold more cards now, the game is bigger, the prizes more worth winning.

The main frontier that Faro urges us to cross is therefore to change heritage from being treated as a limited number of assets to be kept from harm, to being something universal and ubiquitous to exploit as a resource for society as a whole. This is about the use of the past in the present and its renewal into the future. A living heritage is a changing heritage.