The Value of Heritage

4643


The term Historic Environments in the title of this collection of essays is a conventional one in heritage conservation practice, but the scope of the papers is far broader, indeed intended to answer a "contemporary imperative to consider different cultural, historical and social values as equal". Inspired by seminars among a research group of academics and heritage practitioners in the UK, it contains a series of papers by UK and Australian contributors, some theoretical and others illustrated by means of case studies or empirical research data, that take a necessarily wide and postmodern view of the how the imperative above could be instrumentalized in heritage conservation practice.

The papers are organised under three themes: Values and Heritage Stewardship, Cultural Landscapes, and the Heritage of Housing. Of these, the last, with the exception of an empirical research paper by John Pendlebury, Tim Townshend and Rose Gilroy on Bikers, seems a little out of place, given the emphasis of the remainder of the contributions.

A readership of academics and practitioners in heritage management will find the essays thought provoking and useful; theoretical discourse, case studies and reports of empirical research are interwoven in a way that will appeal to theoretician and practitioner alike.

In taking the broad, inclusive and holistic view of heritage management that editors Lisanne Gibson and John Pendlebury emphasise in the introduction, the historic environment and the cultural landscape are often seen synonymously and the papers consider environments as diverse as the Biker Estate at Newcastle upon Tyne, Blackpool as a potential World Heritage site, English country houses, the Georgian House and the Kalkadoo/ Mitakooli Memorial at Corella River in north central Queensland. Others question the role of professionals and experts in heritage practice, the Heritage and heritage of housing, the "authorised heritage discourse" and who creates/consumes it, museums in "an age awash in a surfeit of heritage" and the uneven interests of heritage that discount the importance of the banal, of everyday experience and contemporary cultural landscapes.

That all of the contributors proceed on the basis that the conventionally categorised values of heritage are constructed (e.g. cultural, historical or social) is unremarkable in the postmodern world. More interesting and challenging to the heritage conservation discourse is the corollary, the familiar items and vehicles of heritage interpretation presented to the community (buildings, sites, monuments, landscapes and so on) do not have inherent values, or even stable constructed ones. They are better considered to be vehicles for heritage as a performance that occurs in specific locations, the aim (or effect) of which is not to identify and codify but to regulate social values and cultural meanings. Implicit in this position is that there are no other values in heritage. Aesthetic and technical heritage values do not get any serious attention. The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter gets an honourable mention in more than one paper as a basis for conservation practice that is more explicit and contemporary than UK practice, being at the least place-rather than fabric-fixed. However the case for its advantages is unconvincing in the light of criticism of the manipulation of heritage by professionals and experts in an essay by Peter Howard, their insensitivity to the social construction of meanings (Laurajane Smith) and the mismatch between what professionals and the community consider to be heritage items, as illustrated by Lisanne Gibson and Tracey Avery in essays on cultural landscapes and both official and unofficial public art (graffiti) respectively.

Given the dearth of academic journals publishing research in heritage conservation management, books like this one fill an important niche. The universality of issues and practices in western heritage conservation management is such that there is no disadvantage for non-UK readers in most papers being from UK contributors balanced by some from Australian authors.

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