

Defining Heritage: Conservation Planning in the Post-Industrial City

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INTRODUCTION

In 2003, the historic Gooderham and Worts distillery, which lay vacant and underutilized for more than a decade, reopened as the Distillery District, “a pedestrians-only village entirely dedicated to arts, culture and entertainment.”¹ Apart from the nineteenth century industrial architecture, old machinery and cobblestone sidewalks, little else reminds visitors to the site of the district’s industrial past. These traces of bygone industry are artfully woven into the area’s contemporary landscape; historic buildings made of brick house studio spaces, entranceways to luxury condominiums, art galleries, boutiques, cafés and a theatre, all are spaces of urban commodification. This transformation speaks to the overall disappearance of traditional industry and the rise of service ones in the post-industrial age. Rapid deindustrialization in this period, moreover, increased the historic value of former industrial sites like this one, which explains not only its National Historic Site designation, but also its popularity as a destination attraction.

In an urban landscape where traditional industry, and the built heritage that supported it, has all but disappeared, the Distillery’s distinct Victorian Industrial character makes it a popular destination spot for those in the city who seek what Sharon Zukin describes as “origins,” the ability to “to put down roots” and “to inhabit a space, not just to

consume it as an experience.”² Those who seek the “origins” that Zukin describes find solace at heritage sites like the Distillery District for its ability to “provide the tangible links between past, present and future.”³ Further, unlike other entertainment districts that typically “‘synergize’ chain restaurants, and multiplex movie theatres, the Distillery District is a site for serious theatre, art galleries, and local artisan products.”⁴ Creative, cultural and craft manufacturing industries put the anxieties of those post-industrial consumers, who fear that “prosperity may be an illusion if it isn’t rooted in the production of things,” to rest.⁵ In this way these small scale and localized manufacturers, to which the Mill Street Brewery and ArtScape studios belong, are an essential element of the visitors’ heritage experience at the site.

The way that heritage has developed and is managed at the Distillery District is part of a greater societal shift that in the latter half of the twentieth century redefined the standard use of the term heritage. It was in this period, writes David Harvey, that understanding heritage as an ‘industry’ rather than a

² Sharon Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 6.

³ Sue Millar, “Heritage Management for Heritage Tourism,” *Tourism Management* March 1989, 9.

⁴ Margaret Kohn, “Toronto’s Distillery District: Consumption and Nostalgia in a Post-Industrial Landscape,” *Globalizations* 7.3 (2010): 359–369, 361.

⁵ Kohn, 367.

¹ Distillery District, “Our story” Last modified March 17, 2014, <http://www3.thedistillerydistrict.com/ourstory/>.

‘social movement’ became commonplace.⁶ In addition to asking which irreplaceable resources, both tangible and intangible, should be protected for future generations and how, heritage professionals have also asked who they are protecting these resources for, and what story these items or cultural memories will tell. In the case of industrial heritage, a post-industrial narrative describes the decline of traditional manufacturing and the rise of service, leisure and creative narratives. This bright timeline of progress, however, leaves little room for the littler histories of the working class or darker ones of industrial pollution. Our new definition of the term ‘heritage’ led to a shift in our perceptions of the historic landscape, approaches to heritage conservation planning and our understanding of how heritage could and should be enjoyed, and by whom. This paper argues that while these new ideals have certainly democratized our approach to conservation planning, as exemplified in Toronto’s Distillery District, they have also created unexpected gaps in heritage access and force us to examine why and for whom we are preserving former industrial sites like this one.

HERITAGE REDEFINED

In order to understand heritage at the Distillery District, it is important to contextualize it within the post-industrial period and to understand the factors that have defined the concept in the latter half of the twentieth century. Deindustrialization and changes in the global labour and economic market led to the demise of traditional manufacturing industries like distilleries, paper mills and brickyards. As a result of this decline as well as shifts in the global labour and economic markets, many industrial cities throughout

North America suffered from urban blight, which had a negative impact on public perceptions about downtowns. High unemployment and vacant buildings added to this image.⁷ In their revitalization efforts, city promoters adopted ‘entrepreneurial’ approaches, including place marketing. In an attempt to make their efforts effective in a highly competitive market, these same people have marketed ‘place’ as a way to make their projects stand out and hopefully attract the ‘right’ kinds of people.⁸ Understanding how heritage has been used as a commodity to market place helps to contextualize the direction that heritage conservation planning at the Distillery District took.⁹

In addition, deindustrialization caused the historic significance of industrial sites to increase. According to David Harvey, it was in this period that heritage experts reoriented their focus in heritage conservation to include a celebration of ‘everyday’ places.¹⁰ No longer reserved for the “high culture of the proverbial ‘great and good,’ ” heritage was instead ““of the people”” rather than ““for the people.””¹¹ As the case of the Distillery District shows, creating a heritage that is truly of the people is challenging if we have failed to clearly define who ‘the people’ are. As the following paragraphs will reveal, heritage is a very significant and important element of the visitor’s experience at the district. Even more, as Kohn would suggest it serves to put their anxieties about globalization and urban commodification to rest.¹² I question, however, how democratic and open-ended it is to

⁷ Moore, “Valorizing Urban Heritage? Redevelopment in a Changing City,” 97.

⁸ Moore, 97.

⁹ Moore, 97.

¹⁰ Harvey, 30.

¹¹ Harvey, 30.

¹² Kohn, 367.

⁶ Harvey, David, “The History of Heritage,” *Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*, edited by Brian Graham and Peter Howard. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2008: 30.

create a heritage that caters almost exclusively to middle- and upper- class tastes.

ACTORS INVOLVED

In addition to heritage professionals, additional actors have also been involved in the process of shaping and managing heritage at the Distillery District. Together their expertise has ensured that the project is both respectful of the historical resources found on the site and marketable to visitors.

Cityscape Holdings bought the site with the intention of turning the place into a destination attraction that would stand out from entertainment districts elsewhere in the city. Les Klein of Walter Davies stated that the site was designed in two phases. The first phase of the project was residential and the second retail. The hope was that the local residents who would live in the surrounding condominiums would support its retail enterprises, which has largely been the case.¹³ Some have argued, however, that the cost of condominiums, retail and leisure activities at the site are so high that they are inaccessible to the general population.¹⁴ In other words, heritage at the Distillery District is attached to a price-tag: “the practices and behaviours which characterized the site during its operation as a distillery are replaced by the spectacle of urban consumption.”¹⁵ Moreover, Margaret Kohn writes “the Distillery District is not a place that is frequented by members of the working class and is not designed to highlight working class history or

cater to working class tastes.”¹⁶ Visitors are attracted to the area’s distinct Victorian industrial character, but also the gourmet hot chocolates and one-of-a kind gifts they may find there. These features combined, the historic esthetic and the retail, arts, and entertainment elements, make the Distillery District a destination attraction.

There are several examples of cultural “production”: artists’ studios, a craft brewery and a theatre production company, all of these activities are far from the heavy and large scale manufacturing activities that took place on the site a century ago. Small scale, localized and craft manufacturing industries appeal to a group of middle- upper- class individuals who can afford to shop, live and dine in this exclusive neighbourhood.¹⁷ The Distillery District was designed to meet this class of consumers’ demands for unique products and experiences. Ironically, visitors lose sight of the area’s industrial history in the nostalgic longing they have for artisanal and pre-industrial commodities. Conversely, the Gooderham and Worts Distillery was a multi-national company that sold whiskey and spirits to a global market.¹⁸ As Margaret Kohn writes, “the farmers’ market, the working artists’ studios, the galleries, and the on-site production of bread, beer, ice cream, and chocolate, together they evoke a world in which things are made locally rather than imported and crafted rather than mass produced [...] It is the commodification of de-commodification.”¹⁹ While we should not downplay the real meaning that visitors derive from heritage at the Distillery District, an important question to ask

¹³ R. Bellman, “Aging East-end Area to Become Vibrant Again: Former Home of the British Empire’s Largest Distillery,” *Daily Commercial News and Construction Record*, 71.28 (1998): A1.

¹⁴ Vanessa Mathews, “Set Appeal: Film Space and Urban Redevelopment” *Social & Cultural Geography*, 11.2 (2010): 171-189, 186.

¹⁵ Mathews, 186.

¹⁶ Kohn, 367.

¹⁷ Zukin, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, 6.

¹⁸ Kohn, 367.

¹⁹ Kohn, 367.

moving forward is how a comparable project might better engage a more diverse population.

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly outlined how an understanding of heritage as an industry in the latter half of the twentieth century reoriented the focus of heritage professionals, broadened the scope of the field, and diversified the actors involved in conservation practices. The adaptive reuse of the former Gooderham and Worts Distillery into a post-industrial cultural playground fit into the larger context of these developments. The Distillery District, which has been open for just over a decade, offers some interesting examples of how former industrial areas are being remediated and redeveloped to fit the contemporary landscape and how a National Historic Site and thus a public monument can be owned by a private investor and used as a public space. We may argue, however, that both physical barriers such as architectural design, a gate, and a small guard house, in addition to social and economic barriers, which included the cost of condominiums, activities and services, make the Distillery a private rather than a public space.²⁰ Indeed, many aspects of the complex are targeted at a middle- upper- class audience who have benefited most from deindustrialization and globalization and who have distant, if any, personal connections to the city's industrial past.²¹ These actors have created and supported a heritage at the Distillery District that aligns with their values and have done so in order to make sense of place and self in a fast-changing world. The interactive and participatory role of these individuals seems to suggest that, if properly engaged, visitors themselves may have a very meaningful role in heritage management in the

future. All of this points to an integrated rather than linear approach to conservation planning, which is to say that “while the articulation of heritage values has traditionally been the domain of expert professionals in the fields of history, art history, architecture and archaeology,” accepting the value of the broader public’s input in the heritage process, “will lead to conservation decisions that are more reflective of community values.”²² As our understanding of industrial heritage complexes among other post-industrial sites grows and its possibilities and limitations are better defined, we will presumably find new ways to connect visitors with the past in unconventional but meaningful ways.

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²⁰ Kohn, 367; Mathews, 186.

²¹ Kohn, 367.

²² Chloe M. Fox, *The Evolution of Heritage Conservation Planning in Theory and Practice: A Case Study of Victoria, British Columbia*, (MA Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2007): 15.

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