

## **On Conservation's Edge: A Call for a Social Science of Destruction**

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Heritage conservation as an idea and a field is a reaction to the looming threat of obliteration. “To conserve” means to keep from harm, decay or loss. We spend quite a lot of time talking about this. We also spend a lot of time discussing what is important and who determines this – experts? the community? a bit of both? – and other similar questions. But ultimately the idea is to conserve what is important. But does heritage conservation have a broader goal? Is it merely an academic discipline or field? Or is it something bigger, like a social reform movement, which aims to change the very values of society? I think it does. I think it aims to bring the conservation gaze to all of human existence. The notion of “minimal intervention” at the heart of the Athens Charter could inform all of our lives.

There is a desire to reconcile heritage conservation as an academic discipline with its driving impulse as a calling, as a mission. How do we professionalize the sense of rage I think many of us bring to this field? How do we channel that sense of visceral anger with the present order of things?

Here, I want to look away from our usual subject matter and peer over the edge and talk about the flip side to conservation's coin – the impulse to neglect, devalue, and destroy. But why, you might ask, is looking at conservation's underbelly necessary? What can we learn from understanding the urge to neglect and devalue, and the formalized economic processes that reinforce and enable it? For a start, we can better know the outlines of what we are wrestling with – the social, cultural, economic momentum that holds us back from a society where a stewardship

ethic is the norm. Otherwise we are shadow boxing with phantoms. Secondly, I think this will help us see more clearly the symbiotic relationship between academe and its application in society. The connection between theory and the people on the ground advocating for the protection of old places.

Connecting with the social sciences can bring the heritage movement – traditionally aligned with the disciplines of history, architecture, planning – to see the broader ecology in which conservation functions. These connections could also help to re-catalyze heritage as a social movement (a social reform movement) with additional social purpose. Connections with the social sciences would be particularly valuable. We haven't been nourished by their insights as much as should have. We have had more dialogue with the humanities and the study of culture.

So where does the desire to destroy it come from? What feeds it? How is its very logic embedded in the way we live, the way we generate value – both monetary and symbolic? How does replacement of the old underscore how we evaluate and categorize everything around us? This impulse has broad/complex roots. I also want to look at destruction's second cousin – the urge to replace, the thirst for something new. This gets complicated. It recognizes that many old things are done away with not because of their inherent qualities, but because they are in the way of the dream of something “fresh” and of our time. Perhaps we need to interrogate how we dream, how consumer culture



looks at the evolution of meaning in words important to discussion of culture. I was recently trying to capture some keywords in heritage conservation many of which we talk a lot about, others not so much. Here are some in “wordle” form.

In recent decades, heritage conservation as an academic field has been primarily concerned with understanding heritage value – physical or otherwise – and how to sustain it. Academic discussion quickly jumps to what (identification) and how (treatment). We linger far less on the why. Heritage conservation as a social movement, on the other hand, has been preoccupied with the questions of identification and motivation; with changing hearts and minds through better arguments and stories, or with shaping the property marketplace via carrots and sticks.

The urgency around questions of ‘why’ have only increased in recent years. Our understanding of what heritage is, is expanding, becoming even more all-encompassing; going beyond the special and monumental, to the vernacular ‘supporting cast’ and the whole historic environment.

Many of our sector’s documents begin with ‘why’ as an afterthought. They are the first paragraph in a report and the last written, a heartless cut and paste job full of half-felt slogans: “the past is the foundation of modern identity”; “if we don’t know the past we will repeat it”; “heritage is what we cherish and must pass on to future generations.”

I am convinced that exploring the drive to consume and destroy can help the heritage movement with the ‘why.’ It can help us with the existential question of the utility of the heritage conservation project. We are making connections with the environmental movement and sustainability (or at least we talk about this), but a deeper expansion of conservation’s social relevance could be established.

Here are some recent initiatives that are looking at the matter of WHY.

## **WHY DOES THE PAST MATTER?**

Under the cloud of the 2008 recession and subsequent budget cuts to heritage, an American conference *Why Does the Past Matter* gathered academics and thinkers together to “create a new recognition of the practical uses and values of cultural heritage in 21<sup>st</sup> century society.” They wanted to get beyond the typical slogans. This signals a solid engagement with fundamental questions.

But one of the first questions I thought of when I looked at the program was: why doesn’t the past matter? In whose interests is it that the past remains inconsequential? Scanning through the abstracts I didn’t see this being directly addressed. There seemed to be many papers where there was the familiar rehearsal of self-justifying arguments. Why is destruction the default position from which everything must be saved? We know quite a bit about the political uses of forgetting and erasure in conflict zones, the liquidation of the traces of the past (e.g. the library in Sarajevo). But what about the banal processes that contribute everyday to the elimination of the past? How is the past used as a cheap resource to fuel the present, an externality of the economic system?

There have been other recent calls to expand heritage conservation’s disciplinary gaze. In 2010 UPENN prof Randall Mason and Elizabeth S. Chilton published a White Paper for the National Science Foundation entitled “A Call for a Social Science of the Past”. They argue that “The study of the past has long been relegated to the historiographical disciplines, e.g., archaeology and history. What is the value of the past in contemporary society? How do

we measure the value of heritage for such important societal issues as social cohesion and economic development?” They call for interdisciplinary research involving fields like: anthropology, ecology, economics, geography, history, legal studies, political science, public health, public policy, psychology, regional and urban planning, sociology, and landscape architecture.”

Many of their suggested research areas make absolute sense:

- “Civil Society—Does the “democratization” of heritage participation also encourage democratic public discourse?”
- “Ecology—How can the collective reflection on the past help maintain a balance between intergenerational rights and responsibilities?”
- “Economics—Is tourism the only index of economic benefit to be derived from heritage initiatives?”

But others could be flipped on their heads:

- “Identity—In what ways do the conservation and commemoration of heritage help foster a sense of modern identity among individuals and communities?” But I would ask, how do they drive people apart? Are new places free from baggage in a good way?
- Economics—“Are the monuments and traditions of the past viable resources for local economic development?” But how, I would go on, are they not economically viable?

This initiative is heartening as it shows there is a drive to more fully explore the social implications of conservation. But we could be doing more. There is a need to look directly at the forces of neglect, replacement, and destruction. We should be exploring the convergence of the culture of

consumption and disposability with our built environment. Are we building throw away structures? What does this mean for the environment?

## THE CULTURE OF CONSUMPTION

Annie Leonard’s “The Story of Stuff” is a video – with 20 million hits on YouTube – that has turned into a book and become a phenomena. It is a well-researched, accessible walk through how our lifestyles in the West are part of a larger system of destruction and dysfunction. She explores:

- Planned obsolescence or “designed for the dump” – This idea gained currency in the 1920s and 1930s as a means for stimulating the economy, if things were too well-made. How different is our built environment from other consumer goods?
- Perceived obsolescence – Sometimes called the “obsolescence of desirability” or psychological obsolescence. This perception is fostered through advertising and social pressure. We dispose of perfectly good products at an ever-increasing rate.

What does this have to do with buildings and places? Lots. Renovation, remodeling, these largely fashion-driven activities are hugely wasteful. We could also be exploring sociologist Pierre Bourdieu theories of “symbolic capital” – distinction and taste – and Thorstein Veblen’s *Theory of the Leisure Class* and his critique of conspicuous consumption.

So why don’t people drink the kool aid and want to conserve? We might look to Evolutionary Biology, Anthropology, even Neuroscience. William Rees is an emeritus professor at the University of British Columbia School of Community and Regional Planning and originator of the “ecological footprint”

concept and method. In his article, “What’s Blocking Sustainability? Why is the World Sleepwalking into Ecological Crisis?” he argues we are not rational creatures, and that our actions are often dictated by other things, habits of thought, “common sense”. We claim to be a knowledge and science based civilization. How then do we reconcile the evidence of human intelligence with the fact we don’t apply it? Rationale, data and intelligence are not high-factors in political decision-making. Instinct and emotion working in short term self-interest is more important.

Changing attitudes is one thing, changing practices another and perhaps behavioural psychology can provide insights. Dr. Michael Vallis at Dalhousie University holds clinics on helping patients resistant to change to address unhealthy behaviour. While he is concerned with people who have weight issues or are not managing their diabetes, I think there are fascinating parallels for the heritage sector, that is, if we follow the premise that demolishing perfectly useful buildings is unhealthy behaviour. Given what we have discussed about the pleasures of consumption, it also helps explain why change is difficult.

What makes change hard? There are physiological reasons.

- The Pleasure Principle – ‘I will go to pleasure and pull away from pain.’ Unfortunately, the healthy choice may be the hard one.
- Path of Least Resistance.
- Preference for Short Term Gain – regardless of long-term consequences.
- Socio-biological factors pull towards unhealthy behaviour – eat for comfort, to manage stress.

Vallis points to how our actions are rooted in neuroscience. In many ways, what we do is rooted in

our physical makeup. There is a tension between the frontal lobes of our brain and the limbic system. The frontal lobes are where we make judgment for healthy choices, weigh benefits of decisions. The limbic system in the brain stem is the pleasure centre. These are two totally different systems in our brains and they are often in conflict with each other.

### **NEWNESS, THE NOTION OF THE PRODIGY, PROGRESS.**

We love the uncanny, the unknown. The unbuilt is always more exciting than the known, isn’t it? We can elaborate its grey areas with our imaginations – it is the work of dreams. Sociology and anthropology can help us with critiquing the fetishization of the new, of a certain kind of creation we call “originality.”

There are tremendous tensions between “creative” culture (read “original”) and maintenance culture. Maintaining or renewing are a second class activity, a not fully creative exercise. We are a society that privileges ‘creation,’ not caretaking – why is that? You can see it in the lifecycle of organizations, where many of them collapse after the founders depart. In many ways this is understandable. It’s not just bad succession planning. Who wants to be the janitor/trustee for someone else’s vision? Your agency, your scope of expression is subordinated, right?

### **THE DESTRUCTIVE POTENTIAL OF ‘DREAMS’ OR CONSUMER REVERIES**

When people build a ‘dream home,’ these dreams often involve tearing down something else. I see these structures being thrown up all over Ottawa. Part of this idea is bound up in the idea of immortality projects. Psychologist/philosopher Ernest Becker wrote about this in *The Denial of*

*Death* in 1973. Becker said that an “immortality project” is one where a person creates or becomes part of something they feel will last forever. In doing so they feel they have become heroic and part of something eternal. This gives them feeling that their life has meaning, a purpose, significance in the grand scheme of things.

The heritage conservation movement could interrogate the notion of progress. We could even go so far as to interrogate the naturalization (almost idolatry) of “change for change’s sake.” The discourse of innovation can become a tyranny. Heritage has something profound to say about how we are in the world.

Continuing in a sociological vein, one of my favorite explorations of people’s attachment to place is by US sociologist Melinda Milligan. In her article, “The House Told Me: Historic Preservation and Dwelling as Social Actor” she explores the empathy people develop for the places in which they live. The empathy for non-sentient things.

But there is the converse visceral reaction against older places and the blind celebration of the new and fresh. We see this discourse playing out in Halifax over the last decade where places are seen as old and anti-progressive. This way of seeing was recently on display in Brantford, Ontario where city council expropriated and demolished almost 50 historic buildings along Colborne Street. For them the worn buildings had come to embody the decline of that post-industrial city. The buildings had become places of disgust and needed to be ritualistically purged.

## **PROGRESSIVE ECONOMICS – SLOW GROWTH AND NO GROWTH**

There is much to explore in the field of economics. How does heritage conservation intersect with the

fact our society depends on stimulating needless, useless consumption to continue to expand and grow? Even the way we currently measure growth is problematic. ICOMOS Canada pointed out a few years ago that an important indicator by which economic growth is measured is “housing starts” and these are based entirely upon quantifying the construction of new residential units.

There is also the pernicious logic of devaluation that undergirds our economic system. The idea that things must wear out within a certain timeframe, an idea formalized in our tax system’s conceptions of depreciation and terminal loss. Accountants use complex calculations to determine how the value of objects is reduced over time, usually related to usage, wear and tear, decay, technological obsolescence, inadequacy, or perceived inadequacy caused by shifting fashions. This influences our opinions about our things, our buildings. Slowly our things become encrusted in the idea of worthlessness. The message is that it is no longer good enough for us (“You deserve better!”) and fuels our desire for more.

And then there is real estate development, or “the growth machine.” How many of us know anything about this? And yet it is at the heart of our difficulties. What are the motivations of this industry? We often ascribe dark notions which may not be true. Developers target older buildings because they see potential in maximizing the profit from an underused plot of land – they see value where others don’t, they see beyond what is presently there. But ultimately developers are mirrors of society and they feed off a market place. We want what they are offering...

But then there is the artificial cheapness of new construction. As a sector, we would do well to explore environmental pricing reform and true cost

economics that take into account the externalities of renovation/demolition and new build.

## **CONCLUSION**

So, by way of an ending, does heritage conservation have an overriding goal? Is heritage conservation merely an academic discipline, a professional sub-field, or is it something bigger like a social reform movement which aims to change the very values and institutions of society? I think it is. The typical stages of a social movement are: (1) emerge; (2) coalesce; (3) bureaucratize; (4) either find success, failure or go mainstream; (5) decline. Where are we on this trajectory? Perhaps we are not on a linear pathway but rather a cyclical continuum of rebirth and renewal.

This exploration of the root causes of destruction presents a promising “new frontier” from both an academic and social movement perspective. Connecting more fully with the social sciences can give us insights and more fully reveal the symbiotic connection between conservation in the academic realm and its relevance beyond – its application. We talk a lot about interdisciplinarity and the artificial divisions between fields. But there are also silos between the study and theorization of heritage conservation and its social purpose. I would argue that by understanding the roots and processes of destruction, heritage conservation could gain a stronger sense of itself as a social movement and help rekindle a new societal relevance.