

Heritage in the Borderlands: The Yukon Experience

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INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, a changing paradigm has been identified with regard to the ways in which heritage is identified, protected, conserved and interpreted. Predicated less on the materialist, monumental understanding of the past associated with Western tradition, this approach features rather a broadened scope of understanding that encapsulates this view and goes beyond it to seek to understand the place of ‘heritage’ within broader social or cultural contexts, and the process of conservation as a complex cultural activity.¹ Increasingly, ‘heritage’ is being understood as both object and action.² From this discussion has come an increasing call to adopt a more integrated or holistic approach to undertaking conservation so as to address the myriad of components that constitute heritage and allow a fuller expression of the values this embodies, including elements of the tangible and intangible, natural and cultural, space and place. Debate concerning the ‘New Paradigm’ is generating fruitful areas of discussion and research for the field, including the role of local communities in the conservation process, the role of the heritage professional within communities themselves, and the processes through which

heritage value is constructed, expressed and sustained.

Given this emerging understanding, there is a need to critically review the theory and practice of heritage conservation. In order to recognize and embrace pluralism in concepts of heritage and conservation approaches, it is important to actively ‘map out’ ways in which the theory and practice of disciplines intersect, coincide or conflict. It is also important to find ways to translate the various ‘languages’ of conservation disciplines to one another—potentially developing a new lexicon in the process.³ There is an equally strong and continued need to articulate the connections between the theory and practice of heritage conservation, and the field to broader social, economic and political contexts. In short, the field of heritage conservation must explore its frontiers.

Much insight can be gained from studying the concepts of heritage and conservation practices ‘at the margins’. In this respect, the practice of heritage conservation in Canada’s Yukon Territory offers a

¹ See, for example, Gustavo Aaroz, *Protecting Heritage Places Under the New Heritage Paradigm & Defining its Tolerance for Change: A Leadership Challenge for ICOMOS*, paper presented at the ICOMOS Executive and Advisory Committee Meeting in La Valletta, Malta, October 2009.

² Graham Fairclough, “New Heritage Frontiers” in *Heritage and Beyond*, 29-42, Strasbourg, France. Council of Europe Publishing.

³ ‘Conservation discipline’ is taken here to mean the various theoretical frameworks and practices that have evolved of the past several centuries, which are concerned with the safeguarding, conservation and interpretation of heritage in all its forms. An inclusive definition, this is understood to include architectural preservation and related building sciences, history, museology, archaeology and paleontology, archival and library sciences, and historic site and cultural resource management as some examples. Each of these disciplines is concerned with ‘heritage’ of a specific form, and has accordingly developed their own working language, conceptual background and various tools or practices.

unique opportunity to observe how these issues are being addressed. Similar to the ‘uneasy fit’ of certain types of heritage—most notably Aboriginal cultural landscapes—in the current prevailing system, the Yukon presents a unique case that challenges, and has the potential to enrich, contemporary thought and practice.⁴ In the Territory, a complex social, political and economic landscape exists in which traditional Western and traditional First Nations understanding of heritage and approaches to conservation are interacting in dynamic ways. The following paper is based on observations gleaned from over a year living and working in the Territory’s heritage sector. Far from definitive, the purpose of this paper is to explore these initial impressions of contemporary life, history-making and heritage conservation in the Territory. I argue that the Yukon is home to a unique approach to heritage conservation, primarily based on the convergence (and at times, conflict) between traditional Western and First Nations understandings of heritage. This framework is supported by the activities of the government, non-profit and private sector, and bolstered by the work of both institutions and passionate individuals. The ‘Yukon approach’ provides a variety of lessons that contribute to broader discussions regarding values-based and community-based conservation, more holistic and integrated approaches, and the importance and role of conservation work in general.

WHY EXPLORE ‘THE MARGINS’?

⁴ See, for example, Lisa Prosper, “Wherein Lies the Heritage Value? Rethinking the Heritage Value of Cultural Landscapes from an Aboriginal Perspective,” in *George Wright Forum* 24 (2), 2007: 117-124; also Lisa Prosper, “Aboriginal Perspectives on Renewing and Revitalizing Cultural Meaning in Place,” paper delivered at the 15th annual US/ICOMOS International Scientific Symposium, Texas, May-June 2012.

In *Teaching Local History*, H.A. Stevenson and F.H. Armstrong contend that the instruction of local history is important for several reasons. In studying the history found “just outside the windows of the classroom”—which may also be understood as existing in the margins of broader national or global narratives—they suggest that local history provides a compelling and intimate opportunity to engage readers with the subject and study of history in general. Local history also provides a convenient lens through which these broader narratives or patterns can be understood. Perhaps most importantly, however, is that in studying the local one can test the assumptions and values of ‘mainstream understanding’, with the opportunity to either reinforce or strength existing arguments, or else propose new ones.

This reasoning can easily be extended to heritage conservation and the broader national and international dialogues, which constitute the study and practice of the field. While the intense specialization of discourse found at the ‘heartland’ or centre of a discipline is important to the development of any field, it is important that this is balanced with an understanding gleaned from its margins or frontier. There is much insight to be gained in these special places where ‘the rubber hits the road’, and disciplinary borders blur.

A THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF YUKON HERITAGE

Although best known for the Klondike Gold Rush at the turn of the twentieth century, the Yukon is home to a rich and diverse heritage associated with multiple narratives. During the last Ice Age, parts of Alaska, Siberia and the Yukon remained unglaciated. Known as Beringia, paleontological and archaeological studies have revealed evidence of a

land home to a variety of flora and fauna including woolly mammoths, the scimitar cat and the recently discovered High Arctic camel.⁵ There is also significant evidence of human occupation dating back thousands of years, which speaks to global patterns of human settlement.

European presence began with the fur trade era. This presence, however, remained limited until the 1898 Gold Rush. Almost overnight, large settlements sprung up in the Klondike gold fields and along rivers and other inland transportation routes leading to the fields. Another significant period of development was witnessed during World War II, most notably by the construction of the Canol pipeline and the Alaska-Canada Highway. Over the past sixty years, settlement patterns in the Territory have continued to reflect the ‘boom and bust’ cycle of gold, silver and other mineral mining, whose impact has been mitigated by a steady influx of tourists and the subsequent tourism economy.

The Yukon is home to several First Nations, which in themselves reflect a diversity of traditional linguistic and cultural groups. Prior to the arrival of Europeans, First Nations had established thriving trade routes among groups in the Northwest Territories and along the Pacific Northwest coast. Following contact, Yukon First Nations continued to be engaged in subsistence and trading. At the same time, these groups struggled to retain their sense of identity as they worked, lived and socialized alongside the new settlers. Contemporary developments such as residential schools and land claims underpin a broad pattern of cultural

revitalization and continue to add to the historic legacies of the Territory.

THE YUKON TERRITORY AND ITS HERITAGE FRAMEWORK

At 483,610 square kilometres, Yukon Territory consists of a landmass roughly the size of Spain. Established in 1898, Yukon Territory was governed by the federal government through its capital located in Dawson City, until it was moved to Whitehorse in 1953. In 2003, the *Yukon Act* was proclaimed which formalized and devolved powers to the Territorial government. Approximately 75 percent of the Territory’s 36,000 residents live in Whitehorse; the remainder are located in a dozen or so communities located across the Territory.

Similar to other Canadian jurisdictions, the Yukon has established several regulatory measures for the protection and conservation of heritage resources. Sites were inventoried as part of the Canadian Inventory of Historic Buildings, for example, and other capacity-building activities have been undertaken through the Historic Places Initiative. The *Historic Resources Act* was introduced in 1996 and provides direction for a system of ‘conservation-by-designation’ and other forms of protection for heritage resources. Funds have been established to support the conservation and interpretation of heritage, such as the Yukon Historic Resources Fund and the Historic Properties Assistance program. In addition to a number of National and Territorial Parks and Historic Sites, the Yukon is home to a decentralized network of museums, First Nations cultural centres and interpretive centres.

Yukon First Nation Final Agreements were signed in the 1990s, as a result of decades of negotiation. These ‘modern treaties’ have enabled self-

⁵ CBC. “Ancient Arctic camel offers climate change clues,” March 5, 2013: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/technology/ancient-arctic-camel-offers-climate-change-clues-1.1399352>.

governance for eleven Yukon First Nations, established particular obligations regarding heritage for the federal and Territorial governments, and ultimately created a unique legislative operating environment for heritage, enshrined in constitutional law. Of particular importance are what have come to be known as the ‘catch-up-and-keep-up’ clauses, which mandate Territorial and federal government investment in First Nations heritage programs so as to reach the spending levels for other heritage programs, and then ensure this spending is maintained at equal levels. The Final Agreements further acknowledge the legitimacy of traditional knowledge, regarding oral histories and traditions on equal footing with other types of knowledge in decision-making processes.⁶

Together, the Final Agreements and the *Historic Resources Act* set out a broad framework for the identification, protection, conservation and interpretation of the Territory’s heritage. The scope of this system is arguably broader than other Canadian jurisdictions, as heritage is taken to include historic sites, paleontological and archaeological objects and sites, First Nations languages, documentary resources and a variety of moveable and non-moveable objects, in addition to intangible heritage such as oral history, beliefs and traditional knowledge. This management framework is rooted in the engagement and cooperation of multiple parties in a way that seeks to balance accepted standards and practices of the field with First Nations values and culture.

Enhancing this ‘top-down’, bureaucratic approach is a powerful community-based conservation

movement. As with other Canadian regions where there is a strong spirit of place and landscape attachment, heritage is a featured part of public discourse and life. This may be read in the archival photos adorning the walls of just about every restaurant in the Territory, the number of inches given to heritage concerns in local newspapers, and the lively popular history scene which can be found in both the local history section in the library and with the ‘living repositories’ who hold daily court in bars and coffee shops across the Territory. This situation raises the question of the role of the heritage professional. The relatively small size of the Yukon community and the liveliness of ‘avocational’ conservationists encourage ongoing self-reflection on the part of heritage professionals working within the Territory, as to the knowledge and experience they bring to bear on the conservation and management of heritage. The frontier provides an opportunity to ‘place’ the field of heritage conservation within broader social, political and economic landscapes.

Central to the ‘Yukon approach’ is a strong, implicit understanding of the interconnectedness between arts, culture and heritage. In the Territory, the creative muses have led to interesting and innovative collaborations that work to interpret and celebrate heritage, such as the yarn bombing of the Yukon Transportation Museum’s DC-3, or the annual Artist Residency along the international Chilkoot Trail, which is managed jointly by the US National Parks Service, Parks Canada, and local arts groups. In the Yukon, the scientific or technical side of conservation is firmly matched by more artistic endeavours of expressing and sharing of ideas.

With an emphasis on traditional knowledge and living values, the First Nations perspective

⁶ Anne Leckie, Morgen Smith and Barbara Hogen, “The Legislative Corset: Supporting Heritage in the Yukon”, presentation given at the 2012 Heritage Canada Foundation National Summit, Montreal.

particularly embodies an integrated approach between arts, culture and heritage. Yukon First Nations are engaged in efforts to preserve and revitalize their culture. Connections between heritage, culture and education are expressed through a variety of channels, such as the school system, where local children learn their ABCs while also learning to fish for salmon, hunt caribou and trap muskrat. Arts festivals and community gatherings provide opportunities to share and celebrate cultural knowledge and traditions that include sewing, beading, carving and other traditional practices. At a recent workshop on the care of traditional footwear organized by the Yukon Government's Museums Unit, it was noted that while a museum conservator's approach to caring for footwear was one way to conserve this heritage, it was arguably secondary to efforts that kept alive the traditional knowledge that created the footwear: to sew, in the Yukon, is to conserve.

Like many historical narratives, the significance of the Territory's heritage does not stop at its borders. An integral part of the Yukon heritage system is the co-management of many of its heritage resources. This cooperation extends across national borders manage sites that include the Chilkoot Trail National Historic Site and the Kluane/Wrangell-St. Elias/Glacier Bay/Taschenshini-Elsek World Heritage Site: a serial nomination of parks and protected areas. Under the Shakwak Agreement, the US government has provided funding to support the maintenance and upkeep of the Alaska Highway, an important transportation link for Alaskan and Yukon communities, also commemorated as an Event of National Significance by Canada's Historic Sites and Monuments Board. Co-management also extends between the 'borders' of the Territory and Yukon First Nations: a feature of the Final Agreements includes the co-ownership

and co-management of several important heritage sites in the Territory, including Kluane National Park (with the Champagne and Aishihik First Nations), Vuntut National Park (with the Vuntut Gwitchin First Nation), Fort Selkirk Territorial Historic Site (with the Selkirk First Nation) and Herschel Island Territorial Park, with the Inuvialuit.

In addition to fulfilling obligations legislated under the Final Agreements, co-management also provides a 'place at the table' for local communities to become involved in the conservation process. Although best known as a National Historic Site, Dawson City is not simply a historic attraction, but also home to a lively, year-round community of just over 1,000 people. While the significance of the Gold Rush may be clearly read in the town's saloons, wooden sidewalks and dredge tailing piles, the area is also home to stunning natural heritage and an evolving cultural landscape that is intimately linked with the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation. The conservation of this unique heritage is balanced through the management regimes of Parks Canada, the Yukon Government, the Town of Dawson City, and the Tr'ondëk Hwëch'in First Nation. The management framework is set up to balance the perspectives of multiple community perspectives, including First Nations elders, local residents and business owners, and heritage professionals.

Although certainly not without challenges, it is clear the 'Yukon approach' embodies an inclusive, integrated heritage conservation "mentalité" and system of management. Contemporary conservation practice in the Yukon is preoccupied with the mechanics of implementing the letter, spirit and intent of a legislative framework that has adopted an understanding of cultural landscapes that accounts for tangible and intangible elements, and has recognized the need to balance multiple

narratives, perspectives and values in decision-making processes. Of course, the frontier or 'margins' brings its own set of challenges to bear. The successful implementation of the 'Yukon approach' requires the mitigation of the not-insignificant capacity issues associated with the management and conservation of a diversity of heritage resources throughout a large and largely isolated geographic area, with limited labour and economic resources. This landscape must similarly be overcome in order to foster understanding, respect and cooperation among stakeholders involved in decision-making processes.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the margins of heritage conservation in the Yukon Territory, several observations may be made. Traditional Western approaches may be understood as one of several global perspectives of heritage and its conservation. In the Territory, this approach is encapsulated within a framework that also incorporates traditional First Nations ways of experiencing and understanding heritage, which places greater emphasis on intangible heritage elements and the integration of 'heritage' within broader social, political and economic frameworks.

Given these dual approaches, and influenced by the realities of capacity, there is less of a singular dependency on a 'conservation-by-designation' approach, but rather an understanding of this mechanism as one of several tools available to protect, conserve and interpret the Territory's

heritage. The diversity in natural and cultural heritage that has been encouraged by and underpins conservation efforts can be extended to conservation approaches themselves. In this respect, additional work can be undertaken to better understand the broader systems which function to conserve heritage: that is, the interplay between government, non-profit and private sector activities, as well as the activities of both organizations and individuals. In the Yukon, for example, the scope of heritage conservation activities could arguably be extended to encompass the re-chinking of a log cabin, stabilizing a salmon-spawning stream, or even the simple act of sewing a pair of moccasins.

The 'Yukon approach' raises the question of how our current practices incorporate new and different paradigms of understanding. How flexible are our tools and practices of conservation? How could the field accept sewing, singing and yarn-bombing as accepted practices of conservation, alongside masonry repointing or carpentry reproductions? With the dominance of bureaucratic policies and practices in the field's discourse, does its conception of heritage realistically only extend as far as the 'heritage' that can be managed? In reflecting on the practices at the frontier and in the margins, it becomes evident that these places offer valuable and necessary flexibility and opportunity to blur disciplinary borders, test new approaches and push the boundaries of the conservation field.