WEEK 5

_Sacred Space: The Cultural Heritage Perspective_

The German sociologist Max Weber deplored what he called the de-enchantment of the world.

The most common transvaluation of the formerly sacred in the West today takes the shape of turning sacred sites into cultural heritage sites. Does the phenomenon of cultural heritage succeed in re-enchanting the world? Or does it rather contribute to its further de-enchantment?

Some of the paradoxes of cultural heritage:

I. The _intention_ is good (to save that which is beautiful, significant, etc.), but the _consequences_ (mass tourism, over-exposure, wear and tear, e.g.) can be bad. The intention is to save; the consequence to ruin.

II. Cultural heritage is ostensibly about _the past_; but in reality it is a cultural production in _the present_.
Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett: “Heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past.”
Roger Scruton: “Nothing is more modern than an antique. When an object becomes antique it falls out of history, and changes from a thing to a sign. It ceases to be itself, and becomes the representation of itself. It is no longer used but only interpreted. And this change from innocent signified to guilty signifier is what we mean […] by modernity.”

III. Cultural heritage is ostensibly about memory, but it involuntarily ends up subverting and replacing personal subjective, _true_ memories with official, institutional, objective ones.
True memories fade (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: “Memory is a prelude to forgetting”) and are difficult or impossible to traduce, while heritage makes continuing tangible transfers its business.
Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: “Collective or institutional memory is not reclaimed. It is produced.”

IV. While the consumers of cultural heritage often have an _emotional_ relationship to the past, the producers of it (the cultural heritage professionals) tend to have a _cognitive_ relationship to it.

Recent scholarship, by e.g. the American anthropologists Catherine Cameron and John Gatewood, indicates that what many visitors want from their visits to significant cultural heritage sites tourists is deep engagement and personal spiritual connection and communion with place and with the people and spirit of earlier times. This impulse has been termed “numen-seeking”.
Examples of high-numen locations, i.e. locations with the potential to induce strong emotional reactions, locations perceived to be “holy”:

1. Old places – the older, the holier (Stonehenge, e.g.)
2. Those that memorialize great suffering and sacrifice (holocaust memorials, e.g.)
3. Sites related to national commemoration (war cemeteries, e.g.)
4. Nature and natural heritage sites (the Ice Hotel in Jukkasjärvi, and the ice itself)
5. Beautiful places
6. Art museums (transfer of spiritual values from the religious to the artistic realm in the 18th century) Kirshenblatt-Gimblett: “cathedrals of culture where citizens enact civic rituals at shrines to art and civilization.” William Hazlitt described the National Gallery in London at its opening in 1824 as “holy of holies” and a “sanctuary.” He also described his visit as being “like going on a pilgrimage—it is an act of devotion performed at the shrine of Art.”

The cultural heritage industry uses a “rationalising” rhetoric so does not tend to designate places or objects as “holy,” but uses placeholder words such as “authentic” and “totemic” to try to get at the primary values of the sites and objects they manage. They also tend to promote secondary values – opportunities for information- or pleasure-seeking, increase in national reputation, increase in revenue from increased visitor numbers, etc. – as if they were primary, or foundational, values.

SACRED SPACES AS CULTURAL HERITAGE

One of the interpretations to which the superabundance of sacred architecture naturally lends itself is as a site of cultural heritage.

1. But what happens when sacred artefacts, places and customs, or even religion itself, are designated cultural heritage?
2. What values are added and what values go missing?
3. What remains of sanctity?

The building, dead or dying as a sacred space (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett compares the work of cultural heritage to the work of an undertaker: it consists in the rendering lifelike of the lifeless), is transvalued into heritage. This is a kind of cultural production, a production is completed through the process of exhibition.

When a sacred space becomes a cultural heritage site, when it becomes subject to the “agency of display”:

1. It ceases to be itself, instead becoming a museum/representation of itself. The result is, as Will Self writes, that it “ceases to be real in an important sense”. It suffers a non-reversible loss of aura (Walter
Benjamin: “a property that resides in genuine artefacts”), a loss of authenticity.

2. It loses its natural superabundance of meaning, association, reverberation. A mediated, guided experience forces one to consider one narrative, one set of images, at the expense of all others. A superimposed monologue doesn’t leave room for a personal encounter and the space itself can go mute in the face of the voice-over of the official interpreter.

3. The cultural heritage paradigm also insists on viewing places and buildings as being of instrumental value – this is troublesome for all places, but particularly for sacred architecture as it has, since time immemorial, been afforded its status on different grounds, namely those of possessing intrinsic value. Sacred architecture is an end, not a means, and to see it as a means corrupts/profanes it.

4. The focus on the material/tangible/artefactual is also particularly problematic where sacred architecture is concerned as it is only partly material, and partly ideational – sacred architecture has contemplative content, which it is virtually impossible to traduce within the cultural heritage docket. A sacred space is by definition allusive and multi-dimensional and when transvalued into a site of cultural heritage its hypaethral quality is closed off. There is a way of forgetting sacred architecture that has nothing to do with forgetting various bits of information about it such as when it was built, who the architect was or what style it represents – one can forget how to relate to it as a poetic, existential building and thereby let the most mystical, intriguing and valuable aspect of it slip into oblivion.

5. As the holy can in an important sense be synonymous with the wild (the dangerous, the ‘taboo’), there is an aspect of domestication, of control, of appropriation, of de-wilding implicit in the cultural heritage and museum processes. It tries to make that which is by default ungraspable graspable.

6. The freeze-farming that the cultural heritage process often results in threatens the natural flow of time in sacred places and thereby their connection with “sacred” life cycles.

What remains the same when a sacred place becomes cultural heritage:
1. Our behaviour. We seem predisposed to processions, penitential circuits, and ceremonials. We also revere the idea of reverence, so while we may no longer revere the objects or places themselves, we revere the idea of ourselves revering them.
2. The notion of a something beyond the materially manifest may also have stayed with us. Goethe believed that everything is a symbol (of something else), that everything points, one way or another, to something else, if not gods or religion, then age or beauty…
What value does cultural heritage add?

1. Above all, survival. Cultural heritage grants a second life to that which is no longer perceived to be viable within the framework of its first life.
2. Cultural heritage is undoubtedly also a money-maker for societies and for the organizations that administer the sites. The economic calculus performed by the cultural heritage organizations may in some cases also benefit the sites they preserve.
3. An incidental good that can come of it, is that it may end up fuelling people’s appreciation for authentically sacred places (sacred places not yet transvalued into cultural heritage).
4. If some changes are made to the cultural heritage paradigm it may end up adding more value. Alois Riegl documented three types of value associated with historic monuments:
   – (aesthetic) age value;
   – historic value; and
   – commemorative value.

Currently, the cultural heritage industry is preoccupied with historic value (resulting in preservation in its current state) and commemorative value (resulting in conservation to a prior state). If they were to return to prioritising age value (leaving it to its natural life-cycle), then this might serve to keep our sacred places feeling sacred a little longer.

We are entering a post-secular – or infra-secular – age. This will no doubt also have an effect not only on the popular perception of sacred architecture but also on the cultural heritage industry’s approach to sacred architecture (which risks ruining as much as it preserves).

**My personal vision:** to make the narrative about redundancy redundant. To see an empty, “redundant” church – unlocked, quiet, tranquil, given over to sunlight and dustmotes, and the cold smell of stone – and to state with quiet insistence that far from being past its prime or in need of demolition or re-use or “upgrading” of one kind or another to attract god-knows-whom, it is on the contrary just now at the apex of its powers. Far from being ready for the scrap-heap, it is finally in the act of fulfilling its purpose. It has entered upon the final(?) and most important act of church-becoming: it is filling with The Ineffable. It is only when all the people have finally left that the place is offering itself up as a space for God. We need a new religion, in which redundant churches are the central sacred space and the only congregation the occasional doubtful visitor.