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PLACE-HERITAGE AS A LANGUAGE FOR NEGOTIATING THE FUTURE

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Abstract
This article challenges the convention that heritage is simply about preserving physical fragments of the past, proposing that we understand it instead as an arena and language for negotiating a mutually agreeable future. It establishes the concept of urban habitat as a communal external memory system interwoven with cognitive heritage, and relates this to recent iconoclasms, mnemonic wars, and the potential for heritage landscapes as arenas for negotiating mutually agreeable future narratives. The roles, strengths and weaknesses of civic planning processes are addressed, with an investigation of literature around quantifying cognitive landscape heritage in order for it to be factored into official due process when changes are made to communal habitats. It concludes that this quantification is a developing field and that there is room for expansion in this area of cultural memory studies.

Keywords
Habitat; Heritage; Historic; Memory; Place; Unchange

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All images are my own.

Introduction: heritage as a language for negotiating (un)change

Traditionally, heritage scholarship has focused on conservation and conservatism, preserving a slice of reality as we imagine it looked at some point in the past. Canon heritage texts such as Nora (1996) have framed human memory as an archive, a repository for evidence of the past. This archive's integrity, not to mention the extent of our access to it, determines how we each understand past events that we cannot personally remember. Even contrapuntal heritage scholars such as Smith (2006:91), who critiqued heritage as perpetuating and reinforcing 'the embedded Western narratives of national and elite historical and cultural experiences and values', have nevertheless presented heritage as a vessel for transporting the past into the present. In the public realm, heritage takes many forms which often also try to encapsulate historic realities. Archives such as Manchester and Lancashire Family History Society's (2023) *Manchester Ancestors* offer access to records that reinforce solid personal roots, while a booming gene- testing industry makes £millions from DNA results that have caused some consumers to redefine their ethnic or racial heritage, despite criticism from scientists that these tests perpetuate 'scientifically inaccurate notions of racial difference' (Williams, 2017) and that the DNA samples used are not compared with 'the full array of human genetic diversity' (Bolnick et al., 2007), which means they cannot give accurate results (Marcon, Rachul and Caulfield, 2021). Heritage tourism heavyweights such as the National Trust (2023b) invite visitors to 'travel back in time' at historic stately homes, where they can marvel at the ornate furniture, wonder about whomever had to keep it clean, and sometimes even question how it was all paid for in the first place (Murray, 2021). Dedicated social media groups are created to mourn meaningful places and worry that their significance will be forgotten, overwritten by property developers intent on profitable regeneration (Gregory, 2015).

How is a focus on *unchange*, perhaps even active resistance to change, useful within our present context of increasingly scarce resources which must be recycled, and habitats which must be remodelled, so that we use less, and harm less? As Nora (1996:8) suggests, the impulse to conserve the past may be due to fear that 'everything is on the verge of disappearing'. Perhaps it is an anxious reaction to rapidly emergent unfamiliarity – an emotional buffer against fear provoked by the unfolding present (let alone the anticipated future). The decisions, fortunes, legends and myths of personal ancestors clearly underpin current public identities. If the arena of heritage is a place where the past defines the present, it may therefore also be a place to collectively define the future – ideally one that we need not anticipate with fear. To understand how this may be possible, we need to better understand the mechanisms whereby the heritage and histories that are associated with human habitats can affect the inhabitants' attitudes and behaviour. Heritage scholars such as Gregory, J. (2015), Wells, J. C. (2017), Ekhtiari, M. (2020), Wang, Y. (2021a,b), and Simona, M. (2022) have described people's relationships with physical heritage such as historic buildings and statues, but their focus on physical structures has excluded invisible place heritage such as oral histories and local music. Rowe, T. (2020), Tiddeman, B. (2020), Arrighi, G., See, Z.S. and Jones, D. (2021) and Field, A. E. (2021) have introduced non-physical heritage into physical settings using augmented reality, offering a way to observe interactions between people and the so-called intangible heritage of places. This article therefore proposes place-heritage as a language for negotiating the future – as a way to discuss what is working well (things worth keeping) versus what does not work well (things that we hope will become history). It represents the heritage within our habitats as a

framework integral to human identity, and explores mechanisms whereby people can affect – and be affected by – this framework. Lastly, it identifies opportunities to expand both the framework and our understanding of its mechanisms to include non-physical, intangible and cognitive heritage.

Urban habitat as a setting for identity narratives

Heritage scholarship tends to understand the places we share as repositories for memories, and as tantalisingly incomplete archives of how our ancestors lived. Take a war memorial, for instance, or an archaeological dig site. One is a physical marker of a temporal event which we feel that we should collectively remember. The other contains physical clues which may help us understand a time that we have perhaps collectively forgotten. We can also think about conserved historic sites or collections of historic objects as crucibles for understanding past contexts. Recently, for instance, the National Trust began to consider its properties as products of trade in enslaved people (Murray, 2021). At about the same time, public attention became focused on statues of 18th - 19th century industrialist slaveholders (Rigney, 2022). Some attacked these physical markers because they had repugnant values attached to them, while others panicked that their removal equated to erasure of the past – to a kind of communal forgetting. Four interesting themes emerge from all this. One is the idea of physical place as a sort of *external memory system* (EMS), an assemblage of objects that serve as mementos for collective recollection (Bacon et al., 2023). Another is that people have power over objects in those physical places, be that through protecting them with official policy, demolishing or defacing them, or changing the ideas that the objects signify. Third is the idea of habitat as a kind of communal brain; a cognitive structure that has grown in response to our ongoing behaviours and decisions, which it also influences. As with our personal brains, we each have some control over its future, but we lack full control over its functions because it is an inherited structure. Finally, we can think of this inherited communal memory structure as a setting for identity performance – for enacting and reiterating the narratives and rituals that make and keep us whomever we happen to be (Figure 1).

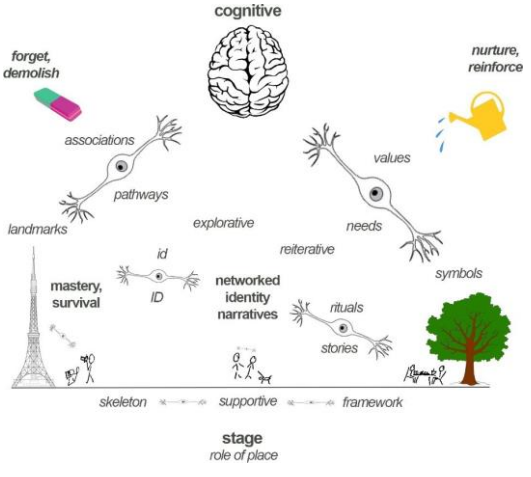

***Figure 1*: Place heritage as a cognitive stage or scaffold**

The inverse of this relationship is that the setting – and by extension, those with any control over its structures – can influence those who act and feel within it (Figure 2).

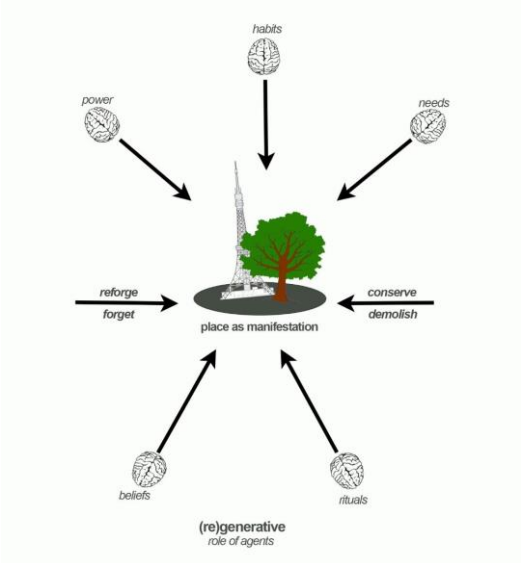

***Figure 2*: Influence of agents on settings**

Having pictured our inherited communal habitat as a stage which supports our cognitive interweaving of collective ideas and values, now imagine what it might be like to share your brain with another entity. As an EMS, the shared heritage landscape evidently has vast potential for provoking and hosting conflict. An illustration of this is known amongst heritage scholars as a *mnemonic war* – a battle for control over what we collectively remember (Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022). An example of one of these cognitive battles took place prior to Russia invading Ukrainian territory in 2022. To justify that invasion, Russia's president asserted that 'the regime' that 'seized and hold power in Kyiv' had initiated 'hostilities' within a geopolitical entity ['Modern Ukraine'] that 'was created entirely by Russia' in a process that had begun 'immediately after the revolution of 1917' (Reuters, 2022: online). He described the demolition of 'monuments to Lenin in Ukraine' as a rejection of communist Ukraine, instead of interpreting this iconoclasm as a rejection of historic Russian influence (Reuters, 2022). European scholars countered that these were 'fabricated historical arguments' deployed to 'legitimize' the invasion (Saryusz-Wolska et al., 2022:1276). This example illustrates the potential power within heritage landscape objects as physical signifiers for collective memories and myths. Further, Saryusz-Wolska et al. (2022) argue that these mnemonic conflicts often precede armed conflict over physical territory, which returns us to the cycle illustrated above, whereby a physical setting enables us to construct meaning such as identity or nationality, whilst the meanings already attached to the setting inform ongoing behaviour within it. If a heritage landscape can be an arena for conflict, it may also be a setting for cooperation, offering both a place and language for negotiating a sustainable, peaceful and creative future. Perhaps that is a little

ambitious, but return for a moment to the extraordinary resonance of those slaveholder statues, and the fact that in 2022, a group of students hoped to engineer change in 21st century social relations by pushing a statue of 17th century slaveholder Edward Colston into the waters of Bristol harbour (Farrer, 2020; BBC News, 2022; Rigney, 2022). It is inadvisable to advocate amateur statue demolition as a way to start a conversation. However, it is another example of how place heritage can have potency which goes far beyond attractive buildings and good places for picnics (Rigney, 2022:10). For some reason, history scholars seem to focus more often on conflict than negotiation, but communication about history sits at the core of heritage.

Successful communication depends on everyone laying down their weapons for a while. Admittedly it is important to tread carefully when revising interpretations of the past, even when motivated by something seemingly positive, such as reconciliation in the present day. There is a risk of burying past wrongdoing without the necessary healing or resolution, and the process of revision can be experienced as oppression (see for instance Al-Shaikh, 2009; Ionescu, A. and Margaroni, M., 2020, Kirn, 2022). Ionescu, A. and Margaroni, M. (2020:10) note that publicly articulating a collective historic trauma cannot guarantee healing, citing Holocaust victims who 'testified [in 1970s oral history interviews] that healing from their wounds was impossible'. As Rigney (2022:11) points out, iconoclasm can be framed as a 'creative process' which allows new leadership to distance itself from 'fallen tyrants' and communicate a 'transition to a new narrative', but this does not necessarily mean that this process is positive or liberating for citizens. That said, our shared habitat is a setting for multiple histories, of countless individuals belonging to many overlapping communities. Just as multiple storylines can play out in the same setting, we can attach many different and even contradictory histories to the same landscape. Although this can cause and reiterate conflicts, it also offers opportunities to find nodes of agreement or negotiate mutually agreed meanings, and to allow disagreements to coexist in situ, exemplifying historic reality (Cloves, 2022; Rigney, 2022). Within the museum sector, curators are focused on how to include diverse voices in interpretation material – that is, the public information presented alongside heritage objects and historic property (see for instance Bedford, 2001; Nielsen, 2017; Goskar, 2020; Belshaw, 2021; Niala, 2021). Outside, in an ever-changing landscape where the inherently polyphonic heritage of a multitude is attached to a constantly shifting structure, it is interesting to consider who has control over un/changes to this structure, and how we might substantiate any polyphonic heritage attached to this structure in a way that informs these un/changes. For place heritage to be an effective language for negotiating future reconciliation, we must consider who is defining the vocabulary, and whose voices can be heard.

Who exerts agency over the physical markers of heritage in our habitat?

Semiotics long ago moved on from the idea that one privileged individual is capable of comprehending the absolute objective meaning of a given signifier (Sless, 1986). Similarly, present-day heritage policymakers recognise that diverse culture is worth protecting, and their best practices attempt to protect heritage that is meaningful to a broad public. For instance, Australian heritage authorities now take a globally 'leading edge' (albeit painfully belated) approach to recognising Aboriginal cultural landscapes, while rather more prosaic

examples include a Grade II listed Royal Mail post-box in Worcestershire, UK, and a Grade II listed asbestos chalet at the site of the world's first Butlins, a low-cost holiday camp which is more likely to trigger nostalgia amongst England's working class than the country's elite (Lilley, 2016; Historic England, 1985, 1987; McGuire, 2017; Lincolnshire Heritage Explorer, 2021; Gillilan, L, 2005). Despite this, there is still strength in the social constructionist theory that language potentiates power-holding and power-sharing. Entities that define what a language actually means hold the power to 'produce' and 'regulate' what 'it is possible to say and know about the world' (Wintrip, 2012:6). This implies that whoever decides which objects stay in or disappear from a communal landscape is defining what we can conceptualise, discuss, value or reject. At a personal level, we can attach whatever meaning we like to a given object in our local habitat. Your stone lion may be my mythical beast. One person's rainy bus stop may mark the first time another kissed their soulmate goodnight.

However, everyday decisions about which of these objects are kept or destroyed are typically made by town planners and property developers. These decisions may be affected by external structures and input from other stakeholders. In England, for instance, planners and developers are advised by archaeologists, and to some extent limited by past legal decisions that are already protecting nearby buildings (Flatman and Perring, 2013; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2021). The public can also influence decisions, typically through localised civic heritage groups, and by protesting against proposed change, with instances of iconoclastic direct action such as knocking over statues (Carter, 2012; MUN Reporter, 2012; Wang, 2021a, 2021b; Rigney, 2022). Ostensibly this means that a member of the public has agency over the structure of their habitat – but one does have to care enough about it to get involved, and the onus is decidedly on the public, which may not have much time to contribute. Local councils in England, for example, are obliged to consult residents about major proposed changes, but need only consult for 21 days (UK Parliament, 2015; Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2021, 2022a, 2022b). Although it is important that civic decision-making is not bogged down by unnecessary bureaucracy, three weeks is not a long time for a busy resident to notice and respond to a council consultation. Further, 'local [English] planning authorities have discretion about how they inform communities and other interested parties about planning applications' (Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, 2022a: online). It seems sensible to give local operatives agency over how they go about their business. In theory, England's planning framework is designed to uphold positive principles such as the UN's global development goals, and English planning decisions are supposed to be made in synergy with 'Local Plans', which comprise a series of overarching objectives pre-agreed with interested members of the local community (Eliasson et al., 2018; Planning Inspectorate, 2022). Nevertheless, in practice there is significant responsibility on the public to stay informed about planning proposals if they want to influence everyday changes to their civic habitat. Of all the ways one can participate in civic life, regularly checking the council planning portal has to rank down amongst most people's least favourite activities. There is also something simultaneously arms-length and confrontational about the process, which depends on a person noticing a new entry in an online database and provoking enough public outcry to affect its outcome. While there are formal infrastructures for the public to influence civic planning decisions, the nature of these structures can make it all too easy for people developing property to demonstrate that due process has been

followed, without truly considering inhabitants who will be affected by changes to their habitat.

Conversely, people who have the wherewithal to join civic heritage groups and stay on top of planning proposals may not be truly representative of inhabitants more broadly. In response to the anti-colonialist statue iconoclasm in 2021, Manchester City Council launched a consultation to learn from the public 'how it should reflect Manchester's history in […] public spaces' by seeking 'opinions on what or who is represented in the public spaces of Manchester through statues, buildings, monuments and place names' (Enventure and Manchester City Council, 2021: online). Whilst the objective may be laudable, Edwards et al. (2021) found that the demographic of the 920 people who responded was not generalisable to the population of Manchester. The opinions of 40-74 year-olds were over-represented compared to the city population, whilst under-39s were under-represented (Edwards et al., 2021). LGBT+ people were over-represented compared to the city, and only 27% of respondents described themselves as not British, whereas 41% of Mancunians have non-British heritage (Edwards et al., 2021). A considerable number of respondents' postcodes were outside Manchester (Edwards et al., 2021). It is only fair to point out that the consultation took place during the Covid-19 pandemic and thus had to be done online; street surveys which could have gathered more representative responses were prohibited. Nevertheless, the example demonstrates how easily heritage landscapes and lexicons can be defined by people who neither inhabit nor inherit them. Despite recognition by national and international policymakers that everyone's heritage is valuable, the lexicon of place heritage – at least in England – is not defined by everyone.

What about heritage that is not a physical landmark?

As a way to negotiate the structure of communal place heritage, the civic planning process has other fundamental weaknesses besides being controlled by people invested in property development and building conservation. Regardless of who controls changes to the setting, established systems for affecting and effecting those changes have focused so closely on the setting that they neglect the narratives themselves. Everyday narratives may seem of little cultural value to anyone outside the immediate neighbourhood, but can mean everything to the inhabitants who are living through and enlivening them. International heritage policies can and do protect what is known as intangible heritage – communal patterns, such as costumes, crafts, dances, rituals, songs or stories, that are passed between people as living heritage, as an inheritance that can only exist through people practicing it (UNESCO, 2022c). UNESCO (2022a) has created an interesting semantic tool for exploring the intangible heritage inscribed on its Intangible Cultural Heritage lists. International policymakers such as UNESCO typically recognise traditions that are rare, remarkable, unique to a particular region, or under threat. But even at a United Nations level, recognition does not guarantee protection – indeed, UNESCO (2022b) itself admits that there are risks associated with inscription on their lists, such as commodification of an intangible practice for tourists, and consequent loss of meaning for its originating community. Scholars such as Field (2021) perceive another risk in treating the past as a kind of 'visitor attraction', or intangible heritage (such as music) as an artefact that can be replayed anywhere like a transmission from the past (Field, 2021:218-20). Field argues that destroying the '[bond] between site, space and community' profoundly alters the meaning and value of the performance, distancing the listener and sterilising the live participation

element that defines intangibility itself. In local civic planning, the risk is that intangible culture is overlooked completely (Field, 2021:218-20). Eliasson et al. (2018) found that (in Sweden, at least), officials responsible for planning decisions routinely took into consideration the impact of physical heritage, such as church buildings, but were less likely to consider stories and collective memory. They did, however, regularly consider local and minority identity, suggesting that polyphony is to some extent informing heritage landscape decisions.

Intangible heritage does not need to be UNESCO-worthy to be valuable to the people who depend on it for their place-based identities and wellbeing (Kopec and Bliss, 2020). Making the landscape less recognisable affects people's memories: human brains are very good at recognising things we have already seen, and some of our oldest brain structures evolved to 'store landmarks' to meet the 'basic need' of 'spatial navigation' (Baars and Gage, 2013:174-6). Our physical setting literally shapes our brains, which 'like to organize a vast amount of incoming information in [neuron] arrays that mirror the layout of the spatial surroundings' (Baars and Gage, 2013:58-9). Just as displacement from a familiar spatial habitat can profoundly harm human wellbeing and identity, intangible heritage that depends upon a material setting is vulnerable to change in that setting (Al-Shaikh, 2009; Clarke et al., 2018; Bond, 2021). Twenty-one of the practices inscribed on UNESCO's 'Urgent Safeguarding List' are under threat due to 'loss of cultural spaces', which is defined as 'diminishing availability of natural or built spaces that are essential for the practice or transmission of intangible heritage' (UNESCO, 2022a: online). Countless more mundane practices are not protected by prestigious policymakers, yet are associated with ever-changing civic landscapes; they must therefore be similarly vulnerable. A parallel problem is that civic planning systems depend on objects that are *still here*, which risks overlooking culture associated with objects that are *now gone*, or never had a landmark in the first place. Property developers must consider existing protected built heritage near their development. If you want to convert a derelict Victorian mill into a boutique shopping destination, your plans must demonstrate that the conversion will not spoil the effect – aesthetic, ambience, impression – of the Grade II listed building next door. If there is no existing protected heritage nearby, it is much easier to change your bit of urban landscape, regardless of the meaning it holds for anyone else. This is problematic if one's heritage and identity is attached to a nearby structure that existed once but has since disappeared, such as illegal raves in abandoned warehouses – or to open spaces, rather than buildings, such as camps or events in fields (Peter, 2020; Kabachnik and Ryder, 2013).

Such problems beg questions around how we might introduce intangibility and everyday narratives into communal landscapes in a way that can be recognised by planning procedures that evolved to consider only physical heritage. Studies on the relationship between people and the historic environment show that scholars recognise the need to consider cognitive narratives as well as setting. However, studies are largely restricted to inhabitants with a pre-loaded interest in built heritage or historic aesthetics. Wells (2017) established that residents of a historic neighbourhood were more attached to where they lived than residents of an aesthetically identical new-build neighbourhood. However, the fact that his participants chose to live in either of these neighbourhoods implies that they valued the historic aesthetic of these places, or at least trusted in its material value. Wang (2021) investigated residents' emotional attachment to heritage objects within Edinburgh,

but recruited participants entirely from local civic associations and history societies set up to focus on civic habitat preservation and enhancement. Individuals choosing to join such groups would likely be predisposed to care about their built habitat. Further, some of the organisations represented in Wang's study, such as Broughton History Society (2023) and The Cockburn Association (2023), charge a joining fee; this would automatically exclude inhabitants who could not afford it. Gregory (2015) concluded that civic heritage discussion groups hosted on social media are 'emotional communities' which could 'moderate' 'larger economic forces hell bent on urban development'. Again, this study confines our understanding to people who value old buildings enough to join a Facebook group that communally mourns their loss, and Gregory's emotive conclusion implies belonging to this community. The UK's National Trust (2007) conducted a neuroimaging study which found that participants' brains had an observable positive response to places that were personally 'meaningful'.

Participants whose brains were scanned included National Trust members (55%) and non-members (45%), and the meaningful places included nature landscapes as well as built environments (National Trust, 2007). However, the brain-scanned cohort comprised only 20 people, and the study aimed 'to understand what it would mean to people if this place no longer existed and how important it was to protect this place' (National Trust, 2007:11). Given that the National Trust (2023a) describes itself as 'Europe's biggest conservation charity', the research can hardly be described as disinterested. Nevertheless, it exemplifies a growing trend within heritage studies towards quantifying the cognitive heritage that we attach to our habitats in order to factor this into civic planning and development decisions.

Conclusion

Urban place heritage is traditionally seen as a realm of *unchange*, preserving remnants of history in a way that is tangible in the present day. However, heritage evidently extends beyond the tangible to include the cognitive structures that we attach to our physical habitats. Our physical heritage offers an arena and lexicon for sustaining individual identities, encoding or challenging communal narratives, perpetuating conflicts and negotiating resolution. Anyone responsible for the structure of our communal landscape is therefore ethically obliged to consider this setting holistically, with respect to the wellbeing and heritage of all who depend on it. However, despite recognition of this obligation at international and theoretical levels, local civic planning practices evolved to emphasise physical structures whilst overlooking the ephemeral culture that enlivens them. Attempts to protect inheritable patterns such as dance and music have given us the notion of 'intangible culture', but risk commodifying and sterilizing human heritage until it means nothing but income to its originating communities. The heritage industry has begun to explore ways to communicate polyphonic heritage without prioritising a dominant narrative, and civic planners do consider diverse cultures. However, heritage scholars have only just begun to explore ways to quantify our cognitive place heritage, and still tend to focus on how this accretes around physical landmarks. Further development of this trend, and exploration of ways to bring non-landmarked heritage into focus, could help to ensure that people who construct and alter our communal physical habitat make decisions that more fully consider our cognitive heritage.

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